

J. S. FLETCHER

THE MIDDLE TEMPLE MURDER

THE ORANGE-YELLOW DIAMOND

THE AMARANTH CLUB

**THE
FLETCHER
OMNIBUS**

THE FLETCHER OMNIBUS

containing three complete novels

by

J. S. FLETCHER

THE MIDDLE TEMPLE MURDER
THE ORANGE-YELLOW DIAMOND
THE AMARANTH CLUB

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**THE MIDDLE
TEMPLE MURDER**

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCRAP OF GREY PAPER

As a rule, Spargo left the *Watchman* office at two o'clock. The paper had then gone to press. There was nothing for him, recently promoted to a sub-editorship, to do after he had passed the column for which he was responsible; as a matter of fact he could have gone home before the machines began their clatter. But he generally hung about, trifling, until two o'clock came. On this occasion, the morning of the 22nd of June, 1912, he stopped longer than usual, chatting with Hacket, who had charge of the foreign news, and who began telling him about a telegram which had just come through from Durazzo. What Hacket had to tell was interesting: Spargo lingered to hear all about it, and to discuss it. Altogether it was well beyond half-past two when he went out of the office, unconsciously puffing away from him as he reached the threshold the last breath of the atmosphere in which he had spent his midnight. In Fleet Street the air was fresh, almost to sweetness, and the first grey of the coming dawn was breaking faintly around the high silence of St. Paul's.

Spargo lived in Bloomsbury, on the west side of Russell Square. Every night and every morning he walked to and from the *Watchman* office by the same route—Southampton Row, Kingsway, the Strand, Fleet Street. He came to know several faces, especially amongst the

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police; he formed the habit of exchanging greetings with various officers whom he encountered at regular points as he went slowly homewards, smoking his pipe. And on this morning, as he drew near to Middle Temple Lane, he saw a policeman whom he knew, one Driscoll, standing at the entrance, looking about him. Further away another policeman appeared, sauntering. Driscoll raised an arm and signalled; then, turning, he saw Spargo. He moved a step or two towards him. Spargo saw news in his face.

"What is it?" asked Spargo.

Driscoll jerked a thumb over his shoulder, towards the partly open door of the lane. Within, Spargo saw a man hastily donning a waistcoat and jacket.

"He says," answered Driscoll, "him, there—the porter—that there's a man lying in one of them entries down the lane, and he thinks he's dead. Likewise, he thinks he's murdered."

Spargo echoed the word.

"But what makes him think that?" he asked, peeping with curiosity beyond Driscoll's burly form. "Why?"

"He says there's blood about him," answered Driscoll. He turned and glanced at the oncoming constable, and then turned again to Spargo. "You're a news-paper man, sir?" he suggested.

"I am," replied Spargo.

"You'd better walk down with us," said Driscoll, with a grin. "There'll be something to write pieces in the paper about. At least, there may be." Spargo made no answer. He continued to look down the lane,

wondering what secret it held, until the other policeman came up. At the same moment the porter, now fully clothed, came out.

"Come on!" he said shortly. "I'll show you."

Driscoll murmured a word or two to the newly-arrived constable, and then turned to the porter.

"How came you to find him, then?" he asked

The porter jerked his head at the door which they were leaving.

"I heard that door slam," he replied, irritably, as if the fact which he mentioned caused him offence. "I know I did! So I got up to look around. Then—well, I saw that!"

He raised a hand, pointing down the lane. The three men followed his outstretched finger. And Spargo then saw a man's foot, booted, grey-socked, protruding from an entry on the left hand.

"Sticking out there, just as you see it now," said the porter. "I ain't touched it. And so——"

He paused and made a grimace as if at the memory of some unpleasant thing. Driscoll nodded comprehendingly.

"And so you went along and looked?" he suggested. "Just so—just to see who it belonged to, as it might be."

"Just to see—what there was to see," agreed the porter. "Then I saw there was blood. And then—well, I made up the lane to tell one of you chaps."

"Best thing you could have done," said Driscoll. "Well, now then——"

The little procession came to a halt at the entry.

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The entry was a cold and formal thing of itself; not a nice place to lie dead in, having glazed white tiles for its walls and concrete for its flooring; something about its appearance in that grey morning air suggested to Spargo the idea of a mortuary. And that the man whose foot projected over the step was dead he had no doubt: the limpness of his pose certified to it.

For a moment none of the four men moved or spoke. The two policemen unconsciously stuck their thumbs in their belts and made play with their fingers; the porter rubbed his chin thoughtfully—Spargo remembered afterwards the rasping sound of this action; he himself put his hands in his pockets and began to jingle his money and his keys. Each man had his own thoughts as he contemplated the piece of human wreckage which lay before him.

“You’ll notice,” suddenly observed Driscoll, speaking in a hushed voice, “You’ll notice that he’s lying there in a queer way—same as if—as if he’d been put there. Sort of propped up against that wall, at first, and had slid down, like.”

Spargo was taking in all the details with a professional eye. He saw at his feet the body of an elderly man; the face was turned away from him, crushed in against the glaze of the wall, but he judged the man to be elderly because of grey hair and whitening whisker; it was clothed in a good, well-made suit of grey check cloth—tweed—and the boots were good: so, too, was the linen cuff which projected from the sleeve that hung so limply. One leg was half doubled under the body; the other was stretched straight out across the threshold; the trunk

was twisted to the wall. Over the white glaze of the tiles against which it and the shoulder towards which it had sunk were crushed there were gouts and stains of blood. And Driscoll, taking a hand out of his belt, pointed a finger at them.

"Seems to me," he said, slowly, "seems to me as how he's been struck down from behind as he came out of here. That blood's from his nose—gushed out as he fell. What do you say, Jim?" The other policeman coughed.

"Better get the inspector here," he said. "And the doctor and the ambulance. Dead—ain't he?"

Driscoll bent down and put a thumb on the hand which lay on the pavement.

"As ever they make 'em," he remarked laconically. "And stiff, too. Well, hurry up, Jim!"

Spargo waited until the inspector arrived; waited until the hand-ambulance came. More policemen came with it; they moved the body for transference to the mortuary, and Spargo then saw the dead man's face. He looked long and steadily at it while the police arranged the limbs, wondering all the time who it was that he gazed at, how he came to that end, what was the object of his murderer, and many other things. There was some professionalism in Spargo's curiosity, but there was also a natural dislike that a fellow-being should have been so unceremoniously smitten out of the world.

There was nothing very remarkable about the dead man's face. It was that of a man of apparently sixty to sixty-five years of age; plain, even homely of feature, clean-shaven, except for a fringe of white whisker,

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trimmed, after an old-fashioned pattern, between the ear and the point of the jaw. The only remarkable thing about it was that it was much lined and seamed; the wrinkles were many and deep around the corners of the lips and the angles of the eyes; this man, you would have said to yourself, has led a hard life and weathered storm, mental as well as physical.

Driscoll nudged Spargo with a turn of his elbow. He gave him a wink. "Better come down to the dead-house," he muttered confidentially.

"Why?" asked Spargo.

"They'll go through him," whispered Driscoll. "Search him, d'ye see? Then you'll get to know all about him, and so on. Help to write that piece in the paper, eh?"

Spargo hesitated. He had had a stiff night's work, and until his encounter with Driscoll he had cherished warm anticipation of the meal which would be laid out for him at his rooms, and of the bed into which he would subsequently tumble. Besides, a telephone message would send a man from the *Watchman* to the mortuary. This sort of thing was not in his line now, now——

"You'll be for getting one o' them big play-cards out with something about a mystery on it," suggested Driscoll. "You never know what lies at the bottom o' these affairs, no more you don't."

That last observation decided Spargo; moreover, the old instinct for getting news began to assert itself.

"All right," he said. "I'll go along with you."

And re-lighting his pipe he followed the little cor-

tège through the streets, still deserted and quiet, and as he walked behind he reflected on the unobtrusive fashion in which murder could stalk about. Here was the work of murder, no doubt, and it was being quietly carried along a principal London thoroughfare, without fuss or noise, by officials to whom the dealing with it was all a matter of routine. Surely——

“My opinion,” said a voice at Spargo’s elbow, “my opinion is that it was done elsewhere. Not there! He was put there. That’s what I say.” Spargo turned and saw that the porter was at his side. He, too, was accompanying the body.

“Oh!” said Spargo. “You think——”

“I think he was struck down elsewhere and carried there,” said the porter. “In somebody’s chambers, maybe. I’ve known of some queer games in our bit of London! Well!—he never came in at my lodge last night—I’ll stand to that. And who is he, I should like to know? From what I see of him, not the sort to be about our place.”

“That’s what we shall hear presently,” said Spargo. “They’re going to search him.”

But Spargo was presently made aware that the searchers had found nothing. The police-surgeon said that the dead man had, without doubt, been struck down from behind by a terrible blow which had fractured the skull and caused death almost instantaneously. In Driscoll’s opinion, the murder had been committed for the sake of plunder. For there was nothing whatever on the body. It was reasonable to suppose that a man who is well dressed would possess a watch and chain, and have

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money in his pockets, and possibly rings on his fingers. But there was nothing valuable to be found; in fact there was nothing at all to be found that could lead to identification—no letters, no papers, nothing. It was plain that whoever had struck the dead man down had subsequently stripped him of whatever was on him. The only clue to possible identity lay in the fact that a soft cap of grey cloth appeared to have been newly purchased at a fashionable shop in the West End.

Spargo went home; there seemed to be nothing to stop for. He ate his food and he went to bed, only to do poor things in the way of sleeping. He was not the sort to be impressed by horrors, but he recognized at last that the morning's event had destroyed his chance of rest; he accordingly rose, took a cold bath, drank a cup of coffee, and went out. He was not sure of any particular idea when he strolled away from Bloomsbury, but it did not surprise him when, half an hour later he found that he had walked down to the police station near which the unknown man's body lay in the mortuary. And there he met Driscoll, just going off duty. Driscoll grinned at sight of him.

"You're in luck," he said. "'Tisn't five minutes since they found a bit of grey writing paper crumpled up in the poor man's waistcoat pocket—it had slipped into a crack. Come in, and you'll see it."

Spargo went into the inspector's office. In another minute he found himself staring at the scrap of paper. There was nothing on it but an address, scrawled in pencil:—Ronald Breton, Barrister, King's Bench Walk, Temple, London.

CHAPTER TWO

HIS FIRST BRIEF

Spargo looked up at the inspector with a quick jerk of his head. "I know this man," he said.

The inspector showed new interest.

"What, Mr. Breton?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm on the *Watchman*, you know, sub-editor. I took an article from him the other day—article on 'Ideal Sites for Campers-Out.' He came to the office about it. So this was in the dead man's pocket?"

"Found in a hole in his pocket, I understand: I wasn't present myself. It's not much, but it may afford some clue to identity."

Spargo picked up the scrap of grey paper and looked closely at it. It seemed to him to be the sort of paper that is found in hotels and in clubs; it had been torn roughly from the sheet.

"What," he asked meditatively, "what will you do about getting this man identified?"

The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, usual thing, I suppose. There'll be publicity, you know. I suppose you'll be doing a special account yourself, for your paper, eh? Then there'll be the others. And we shall put out the usual notice. Somebody will come forward to identify—sure to. And—"

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A man came into the office—a stolid-faced, quiet-mannered, soberly attired person, who might have been a respectable tradesman out for a stroll, and who gave the inspector a sidelong nod as he approached his desk, at the same time extending his hand towards the scrap of paper which Spargo had just laid down.

"I'll go along to King's Bench Walk and see Mr. Breton," he observed, looking at his watch. "It's just about ten—I daresay he'll be there now."

"I'm going there, too," remarked Spargo, but as if speaking to himself. "Yes, I'll go there."

The newcomer glanced at Spargo, and then at the inspector. The inspector nodded at Spargo.

"Journalist," he said, "Mr. Spargo of the *Watchman*. Mr. Spargo was there when the body was found. And he knows Mr. Breton." Then he nodded from Spargo to the stolid-faced person. "This is Detective-Sergeant Rathbury, from the Yard," he said to Spargo. "He's come to take charge of this case."

"Oh?" said Spargo blankly. "I see—what," he went on, with sudden abruptness, "what shall you do about Breton?"

"Get him to come and look at the body," replied Rathbury. "He may know the man and he mayn't. Anyway, his name and address are here, aren't they?"

"Come along," said Spargo. "I'll walk there with you."

Spargo remained in a species of brown study all the way along Tudor Street; his companion also maintained silence in a fashion which showed that he was by nature and custom a man of few words. It was not until the

two were climbing the old balustrated staircase of the house in King's Bench Walk in which Ronald Breton's chambers were somewhere situate that Spargo spoke.

"Do you think that old chap was killed for what he may have had on him?" he asked, suddenly turning on the detective.

"I should like to know what he had on him before I answered that question, Mr. Spargo," replied Rathbury, with a smile.

"Yes," said Spargo, dreamily. "I suppose so. He might have had—nothing on him, eh?"

The detective laughed, and pointed to a board on which names were printed.

"We don't know anything yet, sir," he observed, "except that Mr. Breton is on the fourth floor. By which I conclude that it isn't long since he was eating his dinner."

"Oh, he's young—he's quite young," said Spargo. "I should say he's about four-and-twenty. I've met him only——"

At that moment the unmistakable sounds of girlish laughter came down the staircase. Two girls seemed to be laughing—presently masculine laughter mingled with the lighter feminine.

"Seems to be studying law in very pleasant fashion up here, anyway," said Rathbury. "Mr. Breton's chambers, too. And the door's open."

The outer oak door of Ronald Breton's chambers stood thrown wide; the inner one was well ajar; through the opening thus made Spargo and the detective obtained a full view of the interior of Mr. Ronald Breton's rooms.

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There, against a background of law books, bundles of papers tied up with pink tape, and black-framed pictures of famous legal notabilities, they saw a pretty, vivacious-eyed girl, who, perched on a chair, wigged and gowned, and flourishing a mass of crisp paper, was haranguing an imaginary judge and jury, to the amusement of a young man who had his back to the door, and of another girl who leant confidentially against his shoulder.

"I put it to you, gentlemen of the jury—I put it to you with confidence, feeling that you must be, must necessarily be, some, perhaps brothers, perhaps husbands, and fathers, can you, on your consciences do my client the great wrong, the irreparable injury, the—the——"

"Think of some more adjectives!" exclaimed the young man. "Hot and strong 'uns—pile 'em up. That's what they like—they—Hullo!"

This exclamation arose from the fact that at this point of the proceedings the detective rapped at the inner door, and then put his head round its edge. Whereupon the young lady who was orating from the chair, jumped hastily down; the other young lady withdrew from the young man's protecting arm; there was a feminine giggle and a feminine swishing of skirts, and a hasty bolt into an inner room, and Mr. Ronald Breton came forward, blushing a little, to greet the interrupter.

"Come in, come in!" he exclaimed hastily. "I——"

Then he paused, catching sight of Spargo, and held out his hand with a look of surprise.

"Oh—Mr. Spargo?" he said. "How do you do?—we—I—we were just having a lark—I'm off to court

in a few minutes. What can I do for you, Mr. Spargo?"

He had backed to the inner door as he spoke, and he now closed it and turned again to the two men, looking from one to the other. The detective, on his part, was looking at the young barrister. He saw a tall, slimly-built youth, of handsome features and engaging presence, perfectly groomed, and immaculately garbed, and having upon him a general air of well-to-do-ness, and he formed the impression from these matters that Mr. Breton was one of those fortunate young men who may take up a profession but are certainly not dependent upon it. He turned and glanced at the journalist.

"How do you do?" said Spargo slowly. "I—the fact is, I came here with Mr. Rathbury. He—wants to see you. Detective-Sergeant Rathbury—of New Scotland Yard."

Spargo pronounced this formal introduction as if he were repeating a lesson. But he was watching the young barrister's face. And Breton turned to the detective with a look of surprise.

"Oh?" he said. "You wish——"

Rathbury had been fumbling in his pocket for the scrap of grey paper, which he had carefully bestowed in a much-worn memorandum-book. "I wished to ask a question, Mr. Breton," he said. "This morning, about a quarter to three, a man—elderly man—was found dead in Middle Temple Lane, and there seems little doubt that he was murdered. Mr. Spargo here—he was present when the body was found."

"Soon after," corrected Spargo. "A few minutes after."

"When this body was examined at the mortuary," continued Rathbury, in his matter-of-fact, business-like tones, "nothing was found that could lead to identification. The man appears to have been robbed. There was nothing whatever on him—but this bit of torn paper, which was found in a hole in the lining of his waistcoat pocket. It's got your name and address on it, Mr. Breton. See?"

Ronald Breton took the scrap of paper and looked at it with knitted brows.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "So it has; that's queer. What's he like, this man?"

Rathbury glanced at a clock which stood on the mantelpiece.

"Will you step round and take a look at him, Mr. Breton?" he said. "It's close by."

"Well—I—the fact is, I've got a case on, in Mr. Justice Borrow's court," Breton answered, also glancing at his clock. "But it won't be called until after eleven. Will——"

"Plenty of time, sir," said Rathbury; "it won't take you ten minutes to go round and back again—a look will do. You don't recognize this handwriting, I suppose?"

Breton still held the scrap of paper in his fingers. He looked at it again, intently.

"No!" he answered. "I don't. I don't know it at all—I can't think, of course, who this man could be, to have my name and address. I thought he might have been some country solicitor, wanting my professional services, you know," he went on, with a shy smile at

Spargo; "but, three—three o'clock in the morning, eh?"

"The doctor," observed Rathbury, "the doctor thinks he had been dead about two and a half hours."

Breton turned to the inner door.

"I'll—I'll just tell these ladies I'm going out for a quarter of an hour," he said. "They're going over to the court with me—I got my first brief yesterday," he went on with a boyish laugh, glancing right and left at his visitors. "It's nothing much—small case—but I promised my fiancée and her sister that they should be present, you know. A moment."

He disappeared into the next room and came back a moment later in all the glory of a new silk hat. Spargo, a young man who was never very particular about his dress, began to contrast his own attire with the butterfly appearance of this youngster; he had been quick to notice that the two girls who had whisked into the inner room had been similarly garbed in fine raiment, more characteristic of Mayfair than of Fleet Street. Already he felt a strange curiosity about Breton, and about the young ladies whom he heard talking behind the inner door.

"Well, come on," said Breton. "Let's go straight there."

The mortuary to which Rathbury led the way was cold, drab, repellent to the general gay sense of the summer morning. Spargo shivered involuntarily as he entered it and took a first glance around. But the young barrister showed no sign of feeling or concern; he looked quickly about him and stepped alertly to the side of the dead man, from whose face the detective was turn-

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ing back a cloth. He looked steadily and earnestly at the fixed features. Then he drew back, shaking his head.

"No!" he said with decision. "Don't know him—don't know him from Adam. Never set eyes on him in my life, that I know of."

Rathbury replaced the cloth.

"I didn't suppose you would," he remarked. "Well, I expect we must go on the usual lines. Somebody'll identify him."

"You say he was murdered?" said Breton. "Is that—certain?"

Rathbury jerked his thumb at the corpse.

"The back of his skull is smashed in," he said laconically. "The doctor says he must have been struck down from behind—and a fearful blow, too. I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Breton."

"Oh, all right!" said Breton. "Well, you know where to find me if you want me. I shall be curious about this. Good-bye—good-bye, Mr. Spargo."

The young barrister hurried away, and Rathbury turned to the journalist.

"I didn't expect anything from that," he remarked. "However, it was a thing to be done. You are going to write about this for your paper?"

Spargo nodded.

"Well," continued Rathbury, "I've sent a man to Fiskie's, the hatter's, where that cap came from, you know. We may get a bit of information from that quarter—it's possible. If you like to meet me here at twelve o'clock I'll tell you anything I've heard. Just now I'm going to get some breakfast."

“I’ll meet you here,” said Spargo, “at twelve o’clock.”

He watched Rathbury go away round one corner; he himself suddenly set off round another. He went to the *Watchman* office, wrote a few lines, which he enclosed in an envelope for the day-editor, and went out again. Somehow or other, his feet led him up Fleet Street, and before he quite realized what he was doing he found himself turning into the Law Courts.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CLUE OF THE CAP

Having no clear conception of what had led him to these scenes of litigation, Spargo went wandering aimlessly about in the great hall and the adjacent corridors until an official, who took him to be lost, asked him if there was any particular part of the building he wanted. For a moment Spargo stared at the man as if he did not comprehend his question. Then his mental powers reasserted themselves.

"Isn't Mr. Justice Borrow sitting in one of the courts this morning?" he suddenly asked.

"Number seven," replied the official. "What's your case—when's it down?"

"I haven't got a case," said Spargo. "I'm a pressman—reporter, you know."

The official stuck out a finger.

"Round the corner—first to your right—second on the left," he said automatically. "You'll find plenty of room—nothing much doing there this morning."

He turned away, and Spargo recommenced his apparently aimless perambulation of the dreary, depressing corridors.

"Upon my honour!" he muttered. "Upon my hon-

our, I really don't know what I've come up here for. I've no business here."

Just then he turned a corner and came face to face with Ronald Breton. The young barrister was now in his wig and gown and carried a bundle of papers tied up with pink tape; he was escorting two young ladies, who were laughing and chattering as they tripped along at his side. And Spargo, glancing at them meditatively, instinctively told himself which of them it was that he and Rathbury had overheard as she made her burlesque speech: it was not the elder one, who walked by Ronald Breton with something of an air of proprietorship, but the younger, the girl with the laughing eyes and the vivacious smile, and it suddenly dawned upon him that somewhere, deep within him, there had been a notion, a hope of seeing this girl again—why, he could not then think.

Spargo, thus coming face to face with these three, mechanically lifted his hat. Breton stopped, half inquisitive. His eyes seemed to ask a question.

"Yes," said Spargo. "I—the fact is, I remembered that you said you were coming up here, and I came after you. I want—when you've time—to have a talk, to ask you a few questions. About—this affair of the dead man, you know."

Breton nodded. He tapped Spargo on the arm.

"Look here," he said. "When this case of mine is over, I can give you as much time as you like. Can you wait a bit? Yes? Well, I say, do me a favour. I was taking these ladies round to the gallery—round there, and up the stairs—and I'm a bit pressed for time—I've

a solicitor waiting for me. You take them—there's a good fellow; then, when the case is over, bring them down here, and you and I will talk. Here—I'll introduce you all—no ceremony. Miss Aylmore—Miss Jessie Aylmore. Mr. Spargo—of the *Watchman*. Now, I'm off!" Breton turned on the instant; his gown whisked round a corner, and Spargo found himself staring at two smiling girls. He saw then that both were pretty and attractive, and that one seemed to be the elder by some three or four years.

"That is very cool of Ronald," observed the elder young lady. "Perhaps his scheme doesn't fit in with yours, Mr. Spargo? Pray don't——"

"Oh, it's all right!" said Spargo, feeling himself uncommonly stupid. "I've nothing to do. But—where did Mr. Breton say you wished to be taken?"

"Into the gallery of number seven court," said the younger girl promptly. "Round this corner—I think I know the way."

Spargo, still marvelling at the rapidity with which affairs were moving that morning, bestirred himself to act as cicerone, and presently led the two young ladies to the very front of one of those public galleries from which idlers and specially-interested spectators may see and hear the proceedings which obtain in the badly-ventilated, ill-lighted tanks wherein justice is dispensed at the Law Courts. There was no one else in that gallery; the attendant in the corridor outside seemed to be vastly amazed that any one should wish to enter it, and he presently opened the door, beckoned to Spargo, and came half-way down the stairs to meet him.

"Nothing much going on here this morning," he whispered behind a raised hand. "But there's a nice breach case in number five—get you three good seats there if you like."

Spargo declined this tempting offer, and went back to his charges. He had decided by that time that Miss Aylmore was about twenty-three, and her sister about eighteen; he also thought that young Breton was a lucky dog to be in possession of such a charming future wife and an equally charming sister-in-law. And he dropped into a seat at Miss Jessie Aylmore's side, and looked around him as if he were much awed by his surroundings.

"I suppose one can talk until the judge enters?" he whispered. "Is this really Mr. Breton's first case?"

"His very first—all on his own responsibility, any way," replied Spargo's companion, smiling. "And he's very nervous—and so's my sister. Aren't you, now, Evelyn?"

Evelyn Aylmore looked at Spargo, and smiled quietly.

"I suppose one's always nervous about first appearances," she said. "However, I think Ronald's got plenty of confidence, and, as he says, it's not much of a case: it isn't even a jury case. I'm afraid you'll find it dull, Mr. Spargo—it's only something about a promissory note."

"Oh, I'm all right, thank you," replied Spargo, unconsciously falling back on a favourite formula. "I always like to hear lawyers—they manage to say such a lot about—about——"

"About nothing," said Jessie Aylmore. "But there

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—so do gentlemen who write for the papers, don't they?"

Spargo was about to admit that there was a good deal to be said on that point when Miss Aylmore suddenly drew her sister's attention to a man who had just entered the well of the court.

"Look, Jessie!" she observed. "There's Mr. Elphick!"

Spargo looked down at the person indicated: an elderly, large-faced, smooth-shaven man, a little inclined to stoutness, who, wigged and gowned, was slowly making his way to a corner seat just outside that charmed inner sanctum wherein only King's Counsel are permitted to sit. He dropped into this in a fashion which showed that he was one of those men who loved personal comfort; he bestowed his plump person at the most convenient angle and fitting a monocle in his right eye, glanced around him. There were a few of his professional brethren in his vicinity; there were half a dozen solicitors and their clerks in conversation with one or other of them; there were court officials. But the gentleman of the monocle swept all these with an indifferent look and cast his eyes upward until he caught sight of the two girls. Thereupon he made a most gracious bow in their direction; his broad face beamed in a genial smile, and he waved a white hand.

"Do you know Mr. Elphick, Mr. Spargo?" enquired the younger Miss Aylmore.

"I rather think I've seen him, somewhere about the Temple," answered Spargo. "In fact, I'm sure I have."

"His chambers are in Paper Buildings," said Jessie.

"Sometimes he gives tea-parties in them. He is Ronald's guardian, and preceptor, and mentor, and all that, and I suppose he's dropped into this court to hear how his pupil goes on."

"Here is Ronald," whispered Miss Aylmore.

"And here," said her sister, "is his lordship, looking very cross. Now, Mr. Spargo, you're in for it."

Spargo, to tell the truth, paid little attention to what went on beneath him. The case which young Breton presently opened was a commercial one, involving certain rights and properties in a promissory note; it seemed to the journalist that Breton dealt with it very well, showing himself master of the financial details, and speaking with readiness and assurance. He was much more interested in his companions, and especially in the younger one, and he was meditating on how he could improve his further acquaintance when he awoke to the fact that the defence, realizing that it stood no chance, had agreed to withdraw, and that Mr. Justice Borrow was already giving judgment in Ronald Breton's favour. In another minute he was walking out of the gallery in rear of the two sisters.

"Very good—very good, indeed," he said, absent-mindedly. "I thought he put his facts very clearly and concisely."

Downstairs, in the corridor, Ronald Breton was talking to Mr. Elphick. He pointed a finger at Spargo as the latter came up with the girls: Spargo gathered that Breton was speaking of the murder and of his, Spargo's, connection with it. And directly they approached, he spoke.

"This is Mr. Spargo, sub-editor of the *Watchman*," Breton said. "Mr. Elphick—Mr. Spargo. I was just telling Mr. Elphick, Spargo, that you saw this poor man soon after he was found."

Spargo, glancing at Mr. Elphick, saw that he was deeply interested. The elderly barrister took him—literally—by the button-hole.

"My dear sir!" he said. "You—saw this poor fellow? Lying dead—in the third entry down Middle Temple Lane? The third entry, eh?"

"Yes," replied Spargo, simply. "I saw him. It was the third entry."

"Singular!" said Mr. Elphick, musingly. "I know a man who lives in that house. In fact, I visited him last night, and did not leave until nearly midnight. And this unfortunate man had Mr. Ronald Breton's name and address in his pocket?"

Spargo nodded. He looked at Breton, and pulled out his watch. Just then he had no idea of playing the part of informant to Mr. Elphick.

"Yes, that's so," he answered shortly. Then, looking at Breton significantly, he added, "If you can give me those few minutes, now——?"

"Yes—yes!" responded Ronald Breton, nodding. "I understand. Evelyn—I'll leave you and Jessie to Mr. Elphick: I must go."

Mr. Elphick seized Spargo once more.

"My dear sir!" he said, eagerly. "Do you—do you think I could possibly see—the body?"

"It's at the mortuary," answered Spargo. "I don't know what their regulations are."

Then he escaped with Breton. They had crossed Fleet Street and were in the quieter shades of the Temple before Spargo spoke.

"About what I wanted to say to you," he said at last. "It was—this. I—well, I've always wanted, as a journalist, to have a real big murder case. I think this is one. I want to go right into it—thoroughly, first and last. And—I think you can help me."

"How do you know that it is a murder case?" asked Breton quietly.

"It's a murder case," answered Spargo, stolidly. "I feel it. Instinct, perhaps. I'm going to ferret out the truth. And it seems to me——"

He paused and gave his companion a sharp glance.

"It seems to me," he presently continued, "that the clue lies in that scrap of paper. That paper and that man are connecting links between you and—somebody else."

"Possibly," agreed Breton. "You want to find the somebody else?"

"I want you to help me to find the somebody else," answered Spargo. "I believe this is a big, very big affair: I want to do it. I don't believe in police methods—much. By the by, I'm just going to meet Rathbury. He may have heard of something. Would you like to come?"

Breton ran into his chambers in King's Bench Walk, left his gown and wig, and walked round with Spargo to the police office. Rathbury came out as they were stepping in.

"Oh!" he said. "Ah!—I've got what may be help-

ful, Mr. Spargo. I told you I'd sent a man to Fiskie's, the hatter? Well, he's just returned. The cap which the dead man was wearing was bought at Fiskie's yesterday afternoon, and it was sent to Mr. Marbury, Room 20, at the Anglo-Orient Hotel."

"Where is that?" asked Spargo.

"Waterloo district," answered Rathbury. "A small house, I believe. Well, I'm going there. Are you coming?"

"Yes," replied Spargo. "Of course. And Mr. Breton wants to come, too."

"If I'm not in the way," said Breton.

Rathbury laughed.

"Well, we may find out something about this scrap of paper," he observed. And he waved a signal to the nearest taxi-cab driver.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ANGLO-ORIENT HOTEL

The house at which Spargo and his companions presently drew up was an old-fashioned place in the immediate vicinity of Waterloo Railway Station—a plain-fronted, four-square erection, essentially mid-Victorian in appearance, and suggestive, somehow, of the very early days of railway travelling. Anything more in contrast with the modern ideas of a hotel it would have been difficult to find in London, and Ronald Breton said so as he and the others crossed the pavement.

“And yet a good many people used to favour this place on their way to and from Southampton in the old days,” remarked Rathbury. “And I daresay that old travellers, coming back from the East after a good many years’ absence, still rush in here. You see, it’s close to the station, and travellers have a knack of walking into the nearest place when they’ve a few thousand miles of steamboat and railway train behind them. Look there, now?”

They had crossed the threshold as the detective spoke, and as they entered a square, heavily-furnished hall, he made a sidelong motion of his head towards a bar on the left, wherein stood or lounged a number of men who from their general appearance, their slouched hats, and

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their bronzed faces appeared to be Colonials, or at any rate to have spent a good part of their time beneath Oriental skies. There was a murmur of tongues that had a Colonial accent in it; an aroma of tobacco that suggested Sumatra and Trichinopoly, and Rathbury wagged his head sagely. "Lay you anything the dead man was a Colonial, Mr. Spargo," he remarked. "Well, now, I suppose that's the landlord and landlady."

There was an office facing them, at the rear of the hall, and a man and woman were regarding them from a box window which opened above a ledge on which lay a register book. They were middle-aged folk: the man, a fleshy, round-faced, somewhat pompous-looking individual, who might at some time have been a butler; the woman a tall, spare-figured, thin-featured, sharp-eyed person, who examined the newcomers with an enquiring gaze. Rathbury went up to them with easy confidence.

"You the landlord of this house, sir?" he asked. "Mr. Walters? Just so—and Mrs. Walters, I presume?"

The landlord made a stiff bow and looked sharply at his questioner.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he enquired.

"A little matter of business, Mr. Walters," replied Rathbury, pulling out a card. "You'll see there who I am—Detective-Sergeant Rathbury, of the Yard. This is Mr. Frank Spargo, a newspaper man; this is Mr. Ronald Breton, a barrister."

The landlady, hearing their names and description, pointed to a side door, and signed Rathbury and his

companions to pass through. Obeying her pointed finger, they found themselves in a small private parlour. Walters closed the two doors which led into it and looked at his principal visitor.

"What is it, Mr. Rathbury?" he enquired. "Anything wrong?"

"We want a bit of information," answered Rathbury, almost with indifference.

"Did anybody of the name of Marbury put up here yesterday—elderly man, grey hair, fresh complexion?"

Mrs. Walters started, glancing at her husband.

"There!" she exclaimed. "I knew some enquiry would be made. Yes—a Mr. Marbury took a room here yesterday morning, just after the noon train got in from Southampton. Number 20 he took. But—he didn't use it last night. He went out—very late—and he never came back."

Rathbury nodded. Answering a sign from the landlord, he took a chair and, sitting down, looked at Mrs. Walters.

"What made you think some enquiry would be made, ma'am?" he asked. "Had you noticed anything?"

Mrs. Walters seemed a little confused by this direct question. Her husband gave vent to a species of growl.

"Nothing to notice," he muttered. "Her way of speaking—that's all."

"Well—why I said that was this," said the landlady.

"He happened to tell us, did Mr. Marbury, that he hadn't been in London for over twenty years, and couldn't remember anything about it, him, he said, never having known much about London at any time. And,

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of course, when he went out so late and never came back, why, naturally, I thought something had happened to him, and that there'd be enquiries made."

"Just so—just so!" said Rathbury. "So you would, ma'am—so you would. Well, something has happened to him. He's dead. What's more, there's strong reason to think he was murdered."

Mr. and Mrs. Walters received this announcement with proper surprise and horror, and the landlord suggested a little refreshment to his visitors. Spargo and Breton declined, on the ground that they had work to do during the afternoon; Rathbury accepted it, evidently as a matter of course.

"My respects," he said, lifting his glass. "Well, now, perhaps you'll just tell me what you know of this man? I may as well tell you, Mr. and Mrs. Walters, that he was found dead in Middle Temple Lane this morning, at a quarter to three; that there wasn't anything on him but his clothes and a scrap of paper which bore this gentleman's name and address; that this gentleman knows nothing whatever of him, and that I traced him here because he bought a cap at a West End hatter's yesterday, and had it sent to your hotel."

"Yes," said Mrs. Walters quickly, "that's so. And he went out in that cap last night. Well—we don't know much about him. As I said, he came in here about a quarter past twelve yesterday morning, and booked Number 20. He had a porter with him that brought a trunk and a bag—they're in 20 now, of course. He told me that he had stayed at this house over twenty years ago, on his way to Australia—that, of course, was long

before we took it. And he signed his name in the book as John Marbury."

"We'll look at that, if you please," said Rathbury.

Walters fetched in the register and turned the leaf to the previous day's entries. They all bent over the dead man's writing.

"'John Marbury, Coolumbidgee, New South Wales,'" said Rathbury. "Ah—now I was wondering if that writing would be the same as that on the scrap of paper, Mr. Breton. But, you see, it isn't—it's quite different."

"Quite different," said Breton. He, too, was regarding the handwriting with great interest. And Rathbury noticed his keen inspection of it, and asked another question.

"Ever seen that writing before?" he suggested.

"Never," answered Breton. "And yet—there's something very familiar about it."

"Then the probability is that you have seen it before," remarked Rathbury. "Well—now we'll hear a little more about Marbury's doings here. Just tell me all you know, Mr. and Mrs. Walters."

"My wife knows most," said Walters. "I scarcely saw the man—I don't remember speaking with him."

"No," said Mrs. Walters. "You didn't—you weren't much in his way. Well," she continued, "I showed him up to his room. He talked a bit—said he'd just landed at Southampton from Melbourne."

"Did he mention his ship?" asked Rathbury. "But if he didn't, it doesn't matter, for we can find out."

"I believe the name's on his things," answered the landlady. "There are some labels of that sort. Well,

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he asked for a chop to be cooked for him at once, as he was going out. He had his chop, and he went out at exactly one o'clock, saying to me that he expected he'd get lost, as he didn't know London well at any time, and shouldn't know it at all now. He went outside there—I saw him—looked about him and walked off towards Blackfriars way. During the afternoon the cap you spoke of came for him—from Fiskie's. So, of course, I judged he'd been Piccadilly way. But he himself never came in until ten o'clock. And then he brought a gentleman with him."

"Aye?" said Rathbury. "A gentleman, now? Did you see him?"

"Just," replied the landlady. "They went straight up to 20, and I just caught a mere glimpse of the gentleman as they turned up the stairs. A tall, well-built gentleman, with a grey beard, very well dressed as far as I could see, with a top hat and a white silk muffler round his throat, and carrying an umbrella."

"And they went to Marbury's room?" said Rathbury. "What then?"

"Well, then, Mr. Marbury rang for some whiskey and soda," continued Mrs. Walters. "He was particular to have a decanter of whiskey: that, and a syphon of soda were taken up there. I heard nothing more until nearly midnight: then the hall-porter told me that the gentleman in 20 had gone out, and had asked him if there was a night-porter—as, of course, there is. He went out at half-past eleven."

"And the other gentleman?" asked Rathbury.

"The other gentleman," answered the landlady, "went out with him. The hall-porter said they turned towards the station. And that was the last anybody in this house saw of Mr. Marbury. He certainly never came back."

"That," observed Rathbury with a quiet smile, "that is quite certain, ma'am? Well—I suppose we'd better see this Number 20 room, and have a look at what he left there."

"Everything," said Mrs. Walters, "is just as he left it. Nothing's been touched."

It seemed to two of the visitors that there was little to touch. On the dressing-table lay a few ordinary articles of toilet—none of them of any quality or value: the dead man had evidently been satisfied with the plain necessities of life. An overcoat hung from a peg: Rathbury, without ceremony, went through its pockets; just as unceremoniously he proceeded to examine trunk and bag, and finding both unlocked, he laid out on the bed every article they contained and examined each separately and carefully. And he found nothing whereby he could gather any clue to the dead owner's identity.

"There you are!" he said, making an end of his task. "You see, it's just the same with these things as with the clothes he had on him. There are no papers—there's nothing to tell who he was, what he was after, where he'd come from—though that we may find out in other ways. But it's not often that a man travels without some clue to his identity. Beyond the fact that some of this linen was, you see, bought in Melbourne, we

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know nothing of him. Yet he must have had papers and money on him. Did you see anything of his money, now, ma'am?" he asked, suddenly turning to Mrs. Walters. "Did he pull out his purse in your presence, now?"

"Yes," answered the landlady, with promptitude. "He came into the bar for a drink after he'd been up to his room. He pulled out a handful of gold when he paid for it—a whole handful. There must have been some thirty to forty sovereigns and half-sovereigns."

"And he hadn't a penny piece on him—when found," muttered Rathbury.

"I noticed another thing, too," remarked the landlady. "He was wearing a very fine gold watch and chain, and had a splendid ring on his left hand—little finger—gold, with a big diamond in it."

"Yes," said the detective, thoughtfully, "I noticed that he'd worn a ring, and that it had been a bit tight for him. Well—now there's only one thing to ask about. Did your chambermaid notice if he left any torn paper around—tore any letters up, or anything like that?"

But the chambermaid, produced, had not noticed anything of the sort; on the contrary, the gentleman of Number 20 had left his room very tidy indeed. So Rathbury intimated that he had no more to ask, and nothing further to say, just then, and he bade the landlord and landlady of the Anglo-Orient Hotel good morning, and went away, followed by the two young men.

"What next?" asked Spargo, as they gained the street.

"The next thing," answered Rathbury, "is to find the man with whom Marbury left this hotel last night."

“And how’s that to be done?” asked Spargo.

“At present,” replied Rathbury, “I don’t know.”

And with a careless nod, he walked off, apparently desirous of being alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

SPARGO WISHES TO SPECIALIZE

The barrister and the journalist, left thus uncere-
moniously on a crowded pavement, looked at each other.
Breton laughed.

"We don't seem to have gained much information,"
he remarked. "I'm about as wise as ever."

"No—wiser," said Spargo. "At any rate, I am. I
know now that this dead man called himself John Mar-
bury; that he came from Australia; that he only landed
at Southampton yesterday morning, and that he was in
the company last night of a man whom we have had de-
scribed to us—a tall, grey-bearded, well-dressed man,
presumably a gentleman."

Breton shrugged his shoulders.

"I should say that description would fit a hundred
thousand men in London," he remarked.

"Exactly—so it would," answered Spargo. "But we
know that it was one of the hundred thousand, or half-
million, if you like. The thing is to find that one—the
one."

"And you think you can do it?"

"I think I'm going to have a big try at it."

Breton shrugged his shoulders again.

“What?—by going up to every man who answers the description, and saying ‘Sir, are you the man who accompanied John Marbury to the Aglo——’”

Spargo suddenly interrupted him.

“Look here!” he said. “Didn’t you say that you knew a man who lives in that block in the entry of which Marbury was found?”

“No, I didn’t,” answered Breton. “It was Mr. Elphick who said that. All the same, I do know that man—he’s Mr. Cardlestone, another barrister. He and Mr. Elphick are friends—they’re both enthusiastic philatelists—stamp collectors, you know—and I dare say Mr. Elphick was round there last night examining something new Cardlestone’s got hold of. Why?”

“I’d like to go round there and make some enquiries,” replied Spargo. “If you’d be kind enough to——”

“Oh, I’ll go with you!” responded Breton, with alacrity. “I’m just as keen about this business as you are, Spargo! I want to know who this man Marbury is, and how he came to have my name and address on him. Now, if I had been a well-known man in my profession, you know, why——”

“Yes,” said Spargo, as they got into a cab, “yes, that would have explained a lot. It seems to me that we’ll get at the murderer through that scrap of paper a lot quicker than through Rathbury’s line. Yes, that’s what I think.”

Breton looked at his companion with interest.

“But—you don’t know what Rathbury’s line is,” he remarked.

“Yes, I do,” said Spargo. “Rathbury’s gone off to

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discover who the man is with whom Marbury left the Anglo-Orient Hotel last night. That's his line."

"And you want——?"

"I want to find out the full significance of that bit of paper, and who wrote it," answered Spargo. "I want to know why that old man was coming to you when he was murdered."

Breton started.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "I—I never thought of that. You—you really think he was coming to me when he was struck down?"

"Certain. Hadn't he got an address in the Temple? Wasn't he in the Temple? Of course, he was trying to find you."

"But—the late hour?"

"No matter. How else can you explain his presence in the Temple? I think he was asking his way. That's why I want to make some enquiries in this block."

It appeared to Spargo that a considerable number of people, chiefly of the office-boy variety, were desirous of making enquiries about the dead man. Being luncheon-hour, that bit of Middle Temple Lane where the body was found, was thick with the inquisitive and the sensation-seeker, for the news of the murder had spread, and though there was nothing to see but the bare stones on which the body had lain, there were more open mouths and staring eyes around the entry than Spargo had seen for many a day. And the nuisance had become so great that the occupants of the adjacent chambers had sent for a policeman to move the curious away, and when Spargo and his companion presented them-

selves at the entry this policeman was being lectured as to his duties by a little weazen-faced gentleman, in very snuffy and old-fashioned garments, and an ancient silk hat, who was obviously greatly exercised by the unwonted commotion.

"Drive them all out into the street!" exclaimed this personage. "Drive them all away, constable—into Fleet Street or upon the Embankment—anywhere, so long as you rid this place of them. This is a disgrace, and an inconvenience, a nuisance, a——"

"That's old Cardlestone," whispered Breton. "He's always irascible, and I don't suppose we'll get anything out of him. Mr. Cardlestone," he continued, making his way up to the old gentleman who was now retreating up the stone steps, brandishing an umbrella as ancient as himself. "I was just coming to see you, sir. This is Mr. Spargo, a journalist, who is much interested in this murder. He——"

"I know nothing about the murder, my dear sir!" exclaimed Mr. Cardlestone. "And I never talk to journalists—a pack of busybodies, sir, saving your presence. I am not aware that any murder has been committed, and I object to my doorway being filled by a pack of office boys and street loungers. Murder indeed! I suppose the man fell down these steps and broke his neck—drunk, most likely."

He opened his outer door as he spoke, and Breton, with a reassuring smile and a nod at Spargo, followed him into his chambers on the first landing, motioning the journalist to keep at their heels.

"Mr. Elphick tells me that he was with you until a

late hour last evening, Mr. Cardlestone," he said. "Of course, neither of you heard anything suspicious?"

"What should we hear that was suspicious in the Temple, sir?" demanded Mr. Cardlestone, angrily. "I hope the Temple is free from that sort of thing, young Mr. Breton. Your respected guardian and myself had a quiet evening on our usual peaceful pursuits, and when he went away all was as quiet as the grave, sir. What may have gone on in the chambers above and around me I know not! Fortunately, our walls are thick, sir—substantial. I say, sir, the man probably fell down and broke his neck. What he was doing here, I do not presume to say."

"Well, it's guess, you know, Mr. Cardlestone," remarked Breton, again winking at Spargo. "But all that was found on this man was a scrap of paper on which my name and address were written. That's practically all that was known of him, except that he'd just arrived from Australia."

Mr. Cardlestone suddenly turned on the young barrister with a sharp, acute glance.

"Eh?" he exclaimed. "What's this? You say this man had your name and address on him, young Breton! —yours? And that he came from—Australia?"

"That's so," answered Breton. "That's all that's known."

Mr. Cardlestone put aside his umbrella, produced a bandanna handkerchief of strong colours, and blew his nose in a reflective fashion.

"That's a mysterious thing," he observed. "Um—does Elphick know all that?"

Breton looked at Spargo as if he was asking him for an explanation of Mr. Cardlestone's altered manner. And Spargo took up the conversation.

"No," he said. "All that Mr. Elphick knows is that Mr. Ronald Breton's name and address were on the scrap of paper found on the body. Mr. Elphick"—here Spargo paused and looked at Breton—"Mr. Elphick," he presently continued, slowly transferring his glance to the old barrister, "spoke of going to view the body."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Cardlestone, eagerly. "It can be seen? Then I'll go and see it. Where is it?"

Breton started.

"But—my dear sir!" he said. "Why?"

Mr. Cardlestone picked up his umbrella again.

"I feel a proper curiosity about a mystery which occurs at my very door," he said. "Also, I have known more than one man who went to Australia. This might—I say might, young gentlemen—might be a man I had once known. Show me where this body is."

Breton looked helplessly at Spargo: it was plain that he did not understand the turn that things were taking. But Spargo was quick to seize an opportunity. In another minute he was conducting Mr. Cardlestone through the ins and outs of the Temple towards Blackfriars. And as they turned into Tudor Street they encountered Mr. Elphick.

"I am going to the mortuary," he remarked. "So, I suppose, are you, Cardlestone? Has anything more been discovered, young man?"

Spargo tried a chance shot—at what he did not know.

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"The man's name was Marbury," he said. "He was from Australia."

He was keeping a keen eye on Mr. Elphick, but he failed to see that Mr. Elphick showed any of the surprise which Mr. Cardlestone had exhibited. Rather, he seemed indifferent.

"Oh?" he said—"Marbury? And from Australia. Well—I should like to see the body."

Spargo and Breton had to wait outside the mortuary while the two elder gentlemen went in. There was nothing to be learnt from either when they reappeared.

"We don't know the man," said Mr. Elphick, calmly. "As Mr. Cardlestone, I understand, has said to you already—we have known men who went to Australia, and as this man was evidently wandering about the Temple, we thought it might have been one of them, come back. But—we don't recognize him."

"Couldn't recognize him," said Mr. Cardlestone. "No!"

They went away together arm in arm, and Breton looked at Spargo.

"As if anybody on earth ever fancied they'd recognize him!" he said. "Well—what are you going to do now, Spargo? I must go."

Spargo, who had been digging his walking-stick into a crack in the pavement, came out of a fit of abstraction.

"I?" he said. "Oh—I'm going to the office." And he turned abruptly away, and walking straight off to the editorial rooms at the *Watchman*, made for one in which sat the official guardian of the editor. "Try to get me a few minutes with the chief," he said.

The private secretary looked up.

"Really important?" he asked.

"Big!" answered Spargo. "Fix it."

Once closeted with the great man, whose idiosyncrasies he knew pretty well by that time, Spargo lost no time.

"You've heard about this murder in Middle Temple Lane?" he suggested.

"The mere facts," replied the editor, tersely.

"I was there when the body was found," continued Spargo, and gave a brief résumé of his doings. "I'm certain this is a most unusual affair," he went on. "It's as full of mystery as—as it could be. I want to give my attention to it. I want to specialize on it. I can make such a story of it as we haven't had for some time—ages. Let me have it. And to start with, let me have two columns for tomorrow morning. I'll make it—big!"

The editor looked across his desk at Spargo's eager face.

"Your other work?" he said.

"Well in hand," replied Spargo. "I'm ahead a whole week—both articles and reviews. I can tackle both."

The editor put his finger tips together.

"Have you got some idea about this, young man?" he asked.

"I've got a great idea," answered Spargo. He faced the great man squarely, and stared at him until he had brought a smile to the editorial face. "That's why I want to do it," he added. "And—it's not mere boasting nor over-confidence—I know I shall do it better than anybody else."

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The editor considered matters for a brief moment.

"You mean to find out who killed this man?" he said at last.

Spargo nodded his head—twice.

"I'll find that out," he said doggedly.

The editor picked up a pencil, and bent to his desk.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead. You shall have your two columns."

Spargo went quietly away to his own nook and corner. He got hold of a block of paper and began to write. He was going to show how to do things.

CHAPTER SIX

WITNESS TO A MEETING

Ronald Breton walked into the *Watchman* office and into Spargo's room next morning holding a copy of the current issue in his hand. He waved it at Spargo with an enthusiasm which was almost boyish.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "That's the way to do it, Spargo! I congratulate you. Yes, that's the way—certain!"

Spargo, idly turning over a pile of exchanges, yawned.

"What way?" he asked indifferently.

"The way you've written this thing up," said Breton. "It's a hundred thousand times better than the usual cut-and-dried account of a murder. It's—it's like a— a romance!"

"Merely a new method of giving news," said Spargo. He picked up a copy of the *Watchman*, and glanced at his two columns, which had somehow managed to make themselves into three, viewing the displayed lettering, the photograph of the dead man, the line drawing of the entry in Middle Temple Lane, and the facsimile of the scrap of grey paper, with a critical eye. "Yes—merely a new method," he continued. "The question is—will it achieve its object?"

"What's the object?" asked Breton.

Spargo fished out a box of cigarettes from an untidy

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drawer, pushed it over to his visitor, helped himself, and tilting back his chair, put his feet on his desk.

"The object?" he said, drily. "Oh, well, the object is the ultimate detection of the murderer."

"You're after that?"

"I'm after that—just that."

"And not—not simply out to make effective news?"

"I'm out to find the murderer of John Marbury," said Spargo deliberately slow in his speech. "And I'll find him."

"Well, there doesn't seem to be much in the way of clues, so far," remarked Breton. "I see—nothing. Do you?"

Spargo sent a spiral of scented smoke into the air.

"I want to know an awful lot," he said. "I'm hungry for news. I want to know who John Marbury is. I want to know what he did with himself between the time when he walked out of the Anglo-Orient Hotel, alive and well, and the time when he was found in Middle Temple Lane, with his skull beaten in and dead. I want to know where he got that scrap of paper. Above everything, Breton, I want to know what he'd got to do with you!"

He gave the young barrister a keen look, and Breton nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I confess that's a corker. But I think——"

"Well?" said Spargo.

"I think he may have been a man who had some legal business in hand, or in prospect, and had been recommended to—me," said Breton.

Spargo smiled—a little sardonically.

“That’s good!” he said. “You had your very first brief—yesterday. Come—your fame isn’t blown abroad through all the heights yet, my friend! Besides—don’t intending clients approach—isn’t it strict etiquette for them to approach?—barristers through solicitors?”

“Quite right—in both your remarks,” replied Breton, good-humouredly. “Of course, I’m not known a bit, but all the same I’ve known several cases where a barrister has been approached in the first instance and asked to recommend a solicitor. Somebody who wanted to do me a good turn may have given this man my address.”

“Possible,” said Spargo. “But he wouldn’t have come to consult you at midnight. Breton!—the more I think of it, the more I’m certain there’s a tremendous mystery in this affair! That’s why I got the chief to let me write it up as I have done—here. I’m hoping that this photograph—though to be sure, it’s of a dead face—and this facsimile of the scrap of paper will lead to somebody coming forward who can——”

Just then one of the uniformed youths who hang about the marble pillared vestibule of the *Watchman* office came into the room with the unmistakable look and air of one who carries news of moment.

“I dare lay a sovereign to a cent that I know what this is,” muttered Spargo in an aside. “Well?” he said to the boy. “What is it?”

The messenger came up to the desk.

“Mr. Spargo,” he said, “there’s a man downstairs who says that he wants to see somebody about that mur-

der case that's in the paper this morning, sir. Mr. Barrett said I was to come to you."

"Who is the man?" asked Spargo.

"Won't say, sir," replied the boy. "I gave him a form to fill up, but he said he wouldn't write anything—said all he wanted was to see the man who wrote the piece in the paper."

"Bring him here," commanded Spargo. He turned to Breton when the boy had gone, and he smiled. "I knew we should have somebody here sooner or later," he said. "That's why I hurried over my breakfast and came down at ten o'clock. Now then, what will you bet on the chances of this chap's information proving valuable?"

"Nothing," replied Breton. "He's probably some crank or faddist who's got some theory that he wants to ventilate."

The man who was presently ushered in by the messenger seemed from preliminary and outward appearance to justify Breton's prognostication. He was obviously a countryman, a tall, loosely-built, middle-aged man, yellow of hair, blue of eye, who was wearing his Sunday-best array of pearl-grey trousers and black coat, and sported a necktie in which were several distinct colours. Oppressed with the splendour and grandeur of the *Watchman* building, he had removed his hard billycock hat as he followed the boy, and he ducked his bared head at the two young men as he stepped on to the thick pile of the carpet which made luxurious footing in Spargo's room. His blue eyes, opened to their widest, looked round him in astonishment at the sumptuousness of modern newspaper-office accommodation.

"How do you do, sir?" said Spargo, pointing a finger to one of the easy-chairs for which the *Watchman* office is famous. "I understand that you wish to see me?"

The caller ducked his yellow head again, sat down on the edge of the chair, put his hat on the floor, picked it up again, and endeavoured to hang it on his knee, and looked at Spargo innocently and shyly.

"What I want to see, sir," he observed in a rustic accent, "is the gentleman as wrote that piece in your newspaper about this here murder in Middle Temple Lane."

"You see him," said Spargo. "I am that man."

The caller smiled—generously.

"Indeed, sir?" he said. "A very nice bit of reading, I'm sure. And what might your name be, now, sir? I can always talk free-er to a man when I know what his name is."

"So can I," answered Spargo. "My name is Spargo—Frank Spargo. What's yours?"

"Name of Webster, sir—William Webster. I farm at One Ash Farm, at Gosberton, in Oakshire. Me and my wife," continued Mr. Webster, again smiling and distributing his smile between both his hearers, "is at present in London on a holiday. And very pleasant we find it—weather and all."

"That's right," said Spargo. "And—you wanted to see me about this murder, Mr. Webster?"

"I did, sir. Me, I believe, knowing, as I think, something that'll do for you to put in your paper. You see, Mr. Spargo, it come about in this fashion—happen you'll be for me to tell it in my own way."

"That," answered Spargo, "is precisely what I desire."

"Well, to be sure, I couldn't tell it in no other," declared Mr. Webster. "You see, sir, I read your paper this morning while I was waiting for my breakfast—they take their breakfasts so late in them hotels—and when I'd read it, and looked at the pictures, I says to my wife 'As soon as I've had my breakfast,' I says, 'I'm going to where they print this newspaper to tell 'em something.' 'Aye?' she says, 'Why, what have you to tell, I should like to know?' just like that, Mr. Spargo."

"Mrs. Webster," said Spargo, "is a lady of business-like principles. And what have you to tell?"

Mr. Webster looked into the crown of his hat, looked out of it, and smiled knowingly.

"Well, sir," he continued, "Last night, my wife, she went out to a part they call Clapham, to take her tea and supper with an old friend of hers as lives there, and as they wanted to have a bit of woman-talk, like, I didn't go. So thinks I to myself, I'll go and see this here House of Commons. There was a neighbour of mine as had told me that all you'd got to do was to tell the policeman at the door that you wanted to see your own Member of Parliament. So when I got there I told 'em that I wanted to see our M.P., Mr. Stonewood—you'll have heard tell of him, no doubt; he knows me very well—and they passed me, and I wrote out a ticket for him, and they told me to sit down while they found him. So I sat down in a grand sort of hall where there were a rare lot of people going and coming, and some fine pictures and images to look at, and for a time I

looked at them, and then I began to take a bit of notice of the folk near at hand, waiting, you know, like myself. And as sure as I'm a christened man, sir, the gentleman whose picture you've got in your paper—him as was murdered—was sitting next to me! I knew that picture as soon as I saw it this morning."

Spargo, who had been making unmeaning scribbles on a block of paper, suddenly looked at his visitor.

"What time was that?" he asked.

"It was between a quarter and half-past nine, sir," answered Mr. Webster. "It might ha' been twenty past—it might ha' been twenty-five past."

"Go on, if you please," said Spargo.

"Well, sir, me and this here dead gentleman talked a bit. About what a long time it took to get a member to attend to you, and such-like. I made mention of the fact that I hadn't been in there before. 'Neither have I!' he says, 'I came in out of curiosity,' he says, and then he laughed, sir—queer-like. And it was just after that that what I'm going to tell you about happened."

"Tell," commanded Spargo.

"Well, sir, there was a gentleman came along, down this grand hall that we were sitting in—a tall, handsome gentleman, with a grey beard. He'd no hat on, and he was carrying a lot of paper and documents in his hand, so I thought he was happen one of the members. And all of a sudden this here man at my side, he jumps up with a sort of start and an exclamation, and——"

Spargo lifted his hand. He looked keenly at his visitor.

"Now, you're absolutely sure about what you heard

him exclaim?" he asked. "Quite sure about it? Because I see you are going to tell us what he did exclaim."

"I'll tell you naught but what I'm certain of, sir," replied Webster. "What he said as he jumped up was 'Good God!' he says, sharp-like—and then he said a name, and I didn't right catch it, but it sounded like Danesworth, or Painesworth, or something of that sort—one of them there, or very like 'em, at any rate. And then he rushed up to this here gentleman, and laid his hand on his arm—sudden-like."

"And—the gentleman?" asked Spargo, quietly.

"Well, he seemed taken aback, sir. He jumped. Then he stared at the man. Then they shook hands. And then, after they'd spoken a few words together-like, they walked off, talking. And, of course, I never saw no more of 'em. But when I saw your paper this morning, sir, and that picture in it, I said to myself 'That's the man I sat next to in that there hall at the House of Commons!' Oh, there's no doubt of it, sir!"

"And supposing you saw a photograph of the tall gentleman with the grey beard?" suggested Spargo. "Could you recognize him from that?"

"Make no doubt of it, sir," answered Mr. Webster. "I observed him particular."

Spargo rose, and going over to a cabinet, took from it a thick volume, the leaves of which he turned over for several minutes.

"Come here, if you please, Mr. Webster," he said. The farmer went across the room.

"There is a full set of photographs of members of the present House of Commons here," said Spargo.

“Now, pick out the one you saw. Take your time—and be sure.”

He left his caller turning over the album and went back to Breton.

“There!” he whispered. “Getting nearer—a bit nearer—eh?”

“To what?” asked Breton. “I don’t see——”

A sudden exclamation from the farmer interrupted Breton’s remark.

“This is him, sir!” answered Mr. Webster. “That’s the gentleman—know him anywhere!”

The two young men crossed the room. The farmer was pointing a stubby finger to a photograph, beneath which was written *Stephen Aylmore, Esq., M.P. for Brookminster.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

MR. AYLMORE

Spargo, keenly observant and watchful, felt, rather than saw, Breton start; he himself preserved an imperturbable equanimity. He gave a mere glance at the photograph to which Mr. Webster was pointing.

"Oh!" he said. "That he?"

"That's the gentleman, sir," replied Webster. "Done to the life, that is. No difficulty in recognizing of that, Mr. Spargo."

"You're absolutely sure?" demanded Spargo. "There are a lot of men in the House of Commons, you know, who wear beards, and many of the beards are grey."

But Webster wagged his head.

"That's him, sir!" he repeated. "I'm as sure of that as I am that my name's William Webster. That's the man I saw talking to him whose picture you've got in your paper. Can't say no more, sir."

"Very good," said Spargo. "I'm much obliged to you. I'll see Mr. Aylmore. Leave me your address in London, Mr. Webster. How long do you remain in town?"

"My address is the Beachcroft Hotel, Bloomsbury, sir, and I shall be there for another week," answered the farmer. "Hope I've been of some use, Mr. Spargo. As I says to my wife——"

Spargo cut his visitor short in polite fashion and bowed him out. He turned to Breton, who still stood staring at the album of portraits.

"There!—what did I tell you?" he said. "Didn't I say I should get some news? There it is."

Breton nodded his head. He seemed thoughtful.

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes, I say, Spargo!"

"Well?"

"Mr. Aylmore is my prospective father-in-law, you know."

"Quite aware of it. Didn't you introduce me to his daughters—only yesterday?"

"But—how did you know they were his daughters?"

Spargo laughed as he sat down to his desk.

"Instinct—intuition," he answered. "However, never mind that, just now. Well—I've found something out. Marbury—if that is the dead man's real name, and anyway, it's all we know him by—was in the company of Mr. Aylmore that night. Good!"

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Breton.

"Do? See Mr. Aylmore, of course."

He was turning over the leaves of a telephone address-book; one hand had already picked up the mouthpiece of the instrument on his desk.

"Look here," said Breton. "I know where Mr. Aylmore is always to be found at twelve o'clock. At the A. and P.—the Atlantic and Pacific Club, you know, in St. James's. If you like, I'll go with you."

Spargo glanced at the clock and laid down the telephone.

"All right," he said. "Eleven o'clock, now. I've

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something to do. I'll meet you outside the A. and P. at exactly noon."

"I'll be there," agreed Breton. He made for the door, and with his hand on it, turned. "What do you expect from—from what we've just heard?" he asked.

Spargo shrugged his shoulders.

"Wait—until we hear what Mr. Aylmore has to say," he answered. "I suppose this man Marbury was some old acquaintance."

Breton closed the door and went away: left alone, Spargo began to mutter to himself.

"Good God!" he says. "Dainsworth—Painsworth—something of that sort—one of the two. Excellent—that our farmer friend should have so much observation. Ah!—and why should Mr. Stephen Aylmore be recognized as Dainsworth or Painsworth or something of that sort. Now, who is Mr. Stephen Aylmore—beyond being what I know him to be?"

Spargo's fingers went instinctively to one of a number of books of reference which stood on his desk: they turned with practised swiftness to a page over which his eye ran just as swiftly. He read aloud:

"AYLMORE, STEPHEN, M.P. for Brookminster since 1910. Residences: 23, St. Osythe Court, Kensington: Buena Vista, Great Marlow. Member Atlantic and Pacific and City Venturers' Clubs. Interested in South American enterprise."

"Um!" muttered Spargo, putting the book away. "That's not very illuminating. However, we've got one move finished. Now we'll make another."

Going over to the album of photographs, Spargo deftly

removed that of Mr. Aylmore, put it in an envelope and the envelope in his pocket and, leaving the office, hailed a taxi-cab, and ordered its driver to take him to the Anglo-Orient Hotel. This was the something-to-do of which he had spoken to Breton: Spargo wanted to do it alone.

Mrs. Walters was in her low-windowed office when Spargo entered the hall; she recognized him at once and motioned him into her parlour.

"I remember you," said Mrs. Walters; "you came with the detective—Mr. Rathbury."

"Have you seen him, since?" asked Spargo.

"Not since," replied Mrs. Walters. "No—and I was wondering if he'd be coming round, because——" She paused there and looked at Spargo with particular enquiry—"You're a friend of his, aren't you?" she asked. "I suppose you know as much as he does—about this?"

"He and I," replied Spargo, with easy confidence, "are working this case together. You can tell me anything you'd tell him."

The landlady rummaged in her pocket and produced an old purse, from an inner compartment of which she brought out a small object wrapped in tissue paper.

"Well," she said, unwrapping the paper, "we found this in Number 20 this morning—it was lying under the dressing-table. The girl that found it brought it to me, and I thought it was a bit of glass, but Walters, he says as how he shouldn't be surprised if it's a diamond. And since we found it, the waiter who took the whisky up to 20, after Mr. Marbury came in with the other gentleman, has told me that when he went into the room the two

gentlemen were looking at a paper full of things like this. So there?"

Spargo fingered the shining bit of stone.

"That's a diamond—right enough," he said. "Put it away, Mrs. Walters—I shall see Rathbury presently, and I'll tell him about it. Now, that other gentleman! You told us you saw him. Could you recognize him—I mean, a photograph of him? Is this the man?"

Spargo knew from the expression of Mrs. Walters' face that she had no more doubt than Webster had.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "That's the gentleman who came in with Mr. Marbury—I should have known him in a thousand. Anybody would recognize him from that—perhaps you'd let our hall-porter and the waiter I mentioned just now look at it?"

"I'll see them separately and see if they've ever seen a man who resembles this," replied Spargo.

The two men recognized the photograph at once, without any prompting, and Spargo, after a word or two with the landlady, rode off to the Atlantic and Pacific Club, and found Ronald Breton awaiting him on the steps. He made no reference to his recent doings, and together they went into the house and asked for Mr. Aylmore.

Spargo looked with more than uncommon interest at the man who presently came to them in the visitors' room. He was already familiar with Mr. Aylmore's photograph, but he never remembered seeing him in real life; the Member for Brookminster was one of that rapidly diminishing body of legislators whose members are disposed to work quietly and unobtrusively, doing yeo-

man service on committees, obeying every behest of the party whips, without forcing themselves into the lime-light or seizing every opportunity to air their opinions. Now that Spargo met him in the flesh he proved to be pretty much what the journalist had expected—a rather cold-mannered, self-contained man, who looked as if he had been brought up in a school of rigid repression, and taught not to waste words. He showed no more than the merest of languid interests in Spargo when Breton introduced him, and his face was quite expressionless when Spargo brought to an end his brief explanation—purposely shortened—of his object in calling upon him.

“Yes,” he said indifferently. “Yes, it is quite true that I met Marbury and spent a little time with him on the evening your informant spoke of. I met him, as he told you, in the lobby of the House. I was much surprised to meet him. I had not seen him for—I really don’t know how many years.”

He paused and looked at Spargo as if he was wondering what he ought or not to say to a newspaper man. Spargo remained silent, waiting. And presently Mr. Aylmore went on.

“I read your account in the *Watchman* this morning,” he said. “I was wondering, when you called just now, if I would communicate with you or with the police. The fact is—I suppose you want this for your paper, eh?” he continued after a sudden breaking off.

“I shall not print anything that you wish me not to print,” answered Spargo. “If you care to give me any information——”

“Oh, well!” said Mr. Aylmore. “I don’t mind. The

fact is, I knew next to nothing. Marbury was a man with whom I had some—well, business relations, of a sort, a great many years ago. It must be twenty years—perhaps more—since I lost sight of him. When he came up to me in the lobby the other night, I had to make an effort of memory to recall him. He wished me, having once met me, to give him some advice, and as there was little doing in the House that night, and as he had once been—almost a friend—I walked to his hotel with him, chatting. He told me that he had only landed from Australia that morning, and what he wanted my advice about, principally, was—diamonds. Australian diamonds.”

“I was unaware,” remarked Spargo, “that diamonds were ever found in Australia.”

Mr. Aylmore smiled—a little cynically.

“Perhaps so,” he said. “But diamonds have been found in Australia from time to time, ever since Australia was known to Europeans, and in the opinion of experts, they will eventually be found there in quantity. Anyhow, Marbury had got hold of some Australian diamonds, and he showed them to me at his hotel—a number of them. We examined them in his room.”

“What did he do with them—afterwards?” asked Spargo.

“He put them in his waistcoat pocket—in a very small wash-leather bag, from which he had taken them. There were, in all, sixteen or twenty stones—not more, and they were all small. I advised him to see some expert—I mentioned Streeter’s to him. Now, I can tell you how he got hold of Mr. Breton’s address.”

The two young men pricked up their ears. Spargo unconsciously tightened his hold on the pencil with which he was making notes.

"He got it from me," continued Mr. Aylmore. "The handwriting on the scrap of paper is mine, hurriedly scrawled. He wanted legal advice. As I knew very little about lawyers, I told him that if he called on Mr. Breton, Mr. Breton would be able to tell him of a first-class, sharp solicitor. I wrote down Mr. Breton's address for him, on a scrap of paper which he tore off a letter that he took from his pocket. By the by, I observe that when his body was found there was nothing on it in the shape of papers or money. I am quite sure that when I left him he had a lot of gold on him, those diamonds, and a breast-pocket full of letters."

"Where did you leave him, sir?" asked Spargo. "You left the hotel together, I believe?"

"Yes. We strolled along when we left it. Having once met, we had much to talk of, and it was a fine night. We walked across Waterloo Bridge and very shortly afterwards he left me. And that is really all I know. My own impression——" He paused for a moment and Spargo waited silently.

"My own impression—though I confess it may seem to have no very solid grounds—is that Marbury was decoyed to where he was found, and was robbed and murdered by some person who knew he had valuables on him. There is the fact that he was robbed, at any rate."

"I've had a notion," said Breton, diffidently. "Mayn't be worth much, but I've had it, all the same. Some fellow-passenger of Marbury's may have tracked

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him all day—Middle Temple Lane's pretty lonely at night, you know."

No one made any comment upon this suggestion, and on Spargo looking at Mr. Aylmore, the Member of Parliament rose and glanced at the door.

"Well, that's all I can tell you, Mr. Spargo," he said. "You see, it's not much, after all. Of course, there'll be an inquest on Marbury, and I shall have to re-tell it. But you're welcome to print what I've told you."

Spargo left Breton with his future father-in-law and went away towards New Scotland Yard. He and Rathbury had promised to share news—now he had some to communicate.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MAN FROM THE SAFE DEPOSIT

Spargo found Rathbury sitting alone in a small, somewhat dismal apartment which was chiefly remarkable for the business-like paucity of its furnishings and its indefinable air of secrecy. There was a plain writing-table and a hard chair or two; a map of London, much discoloured, on the wall; a few faded photographs of eminent bands in the world of crime, and a similar number of well-thumbed books of reference. The detective himself, when Spargo was shown in to him, was seated at the table, chewing an unlighted cigar, and engaged in the apparently aimless task of drawing hieroglyphics on scraps of paper. He looked up as the journalist entered, and held out his hand.

“Well, I congratulate you on what you stuck in the *Watchman* this morning,” he said. “Made extra good reading, I thought. They did right to let you tackle that job. Going straight through with it now, I suppose, Mr. Spargo?”

Spargo dropped into the chair nearest to Rathbury’s right hand. He lighted a cigarette, and having blown out a whiff of smoke, nodded his head in a fashion which indicated that the detective might consider his question answered in the affirmative.

“Look here,” he said. “We settled yesterday, didn’t

we, that you and I are to consider ourselves partners, as it were, in this job? That's all right," he continued, as Rathbury nodded very quietly. "Very well—have you made any further progress?"

Rathbury put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and, leaning back in his chair, shook his head.

"Frankly, I haven't," he replied. "Of course, there's a lot being done in the usual official-routine way. We've men out making various enquiries. We're enquiring about Marbury's voyage to England. All that we know up to now is that he was certainly a passenger on a liner which landed at Southampton in accordance with what he told those people at the Anglo-Orient, that he left the ship in the usual way and was understood to take the train to town—as he did. That's all. There's nothing in that. We've cabled to Melbourne for any news of him from there. But I expect little from that."

"All right," said Spargo. "And—what are you doing—you, yourself? Because, if we're to share facts, I must know what my partner's after. Just now, you seemed to be—drawing."

Rathbury laughed.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he said, "when I want to work things out, I come into this room—it's quiet, as you see—and I scribble anything on paper while I think. I was figuring on my next step, and——"

"Do you see it?" asked Spargo, quickly.

"Well—I want to find the man who went with Marbury to that hotel," replied Rathbury. "It seems to me——"

Spargo wagged his finger at his fellow-contriver.

"I've found him," he said. "That's what I wrote that article for—to find him. I knew it would find him. I've never had any training in your sort of work, but I knew that article would get him. And it has got him."

Rathbury accorded the journalist a look of admiration.

"Good!" he said. "And—who is he?"

"I'll tell you the story," answered Spargo, "and in a summary. This morning a man named Webster, a farmer, a visitor to London, came to me at the office, and said that being at the House of Commons last night he witnessed a meeting between Marbury and a man who was evidently a Member of Parliament, and saw them go away together. I showed him an album of photographs of the present members, and he immediately recognized the portrait of one of them as the man in question. I thereupon took the portrait to the Anglo-Orient Hotel—Mrs. Walters also at once recognized it as that of the man who came to the hotel with Marbury, stopped with him a while in his room, and left with him. The man is Mr. Stephen Aylmore, the member for Brookminster."

Rathbury expressed his feelings in a sharp whistle.

"I know him!" he said. "Of course—I remember Mrs. Walters's description now. But his is a familiar type—tall, grey-bearded, well-dressed. Um!—well, we'll have to see Mr. Aylmore at once."

"I've seen him," said Spargo. "Naturally! For you see, Mrs. Walters gave me a bit more evidence. This morning they found a loose diamend on the floor of Number 20, and after it was found the waiter who

took the drinks up to Marbury and his guest that night remembered that when he entered the room the two gentlemen were looking at a paper full of similar objects. So then I went on to see Mr. Aylmore. You know young Breton, the barrister?—you met him with me, you remember?”

“The young fellow whose name and address were found on Marbury,” replied Rathbury. “I remember.”

“Breton is engaged to Aylmore’s daughter,” continued Spargo. “Breton took me to Aylmore’s club. And Aylmore gives a plain, straightforward account of the matter which he’s granted me leave to print. It clears up a lot of things. Aylmore knew Marbury over twenty years ago. He lost sight of him. They met accidentally in the lobby of the House on the evening preceding the murder. Marbury told him that he wanted his advice about those rare things, Australian diamonds. He went back with him to his hotel and spent a while with him; then they walked out together as far as Waterloo Bridge, where Aylmore left him and went home. Further, the scrap of grey paper is accounted for. Marbury wanted the address of a smart solicitor; Aylmore didn’t know of one but told Marbury that if he called on young Breton, he’d know, and would put him in the way to find one. Marbury wrote Breton’s address down. That’s Aylmore’s story. But it’s got an important addition. Aylmore says that when he left Marbury, Marbury had on him a quantity of those diamonds in a wash-leather bag, a lot of gold, and a breast-pocket full of letters and papers. Now—there was nothing on him when he was found dead in Middle Temple Lane.”

Spargo stopped and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"That's all I know," he said. "What do you make of it?"

Rathbury leaned back in his chair in his apparently favourite attitude and stared hard at the dusty ceiling above him.

"Don't know," he said. "It brings things up to a point, certainly. Aylmore and Marbury parted at Waterloo Bridge—very late. Waterloo Bridge is pretty well next door to the Temple. But—how did Marbury get into the Temple, unobserved? We've made every enquiry, and we can't trace him in any way as regards that movement. There's a clue for his going there in the scrap of paper bearing Breton's address, but even a Colonial would know that no business was done in the Temple at midnight, eh?"

"Well," said Spargo, "I've thought of one or two things. He may have been one of those men who like to wander around at night. He may have seen—he would see—plenty of lights in the Temple at that hour; he may have slipped in unobserved—it's possible, it's quite possible. I once had a moonlight saunter in the Temple myself after midnight, and had no difficulty about walking in and out, either. But—if Marbury was murdered for the sake of what he had on him—how did he meet with his murderer or murderers in there? Criminals don't hang about Middle Temple Lane."

The detective shook his head. He picked up his pencil and began making more hieroglyphics.

"What's your theory, Mr. Spargo?" he asked suddenly. "I suppose you've got one."

"Have you?" asked Spargo, bluntly.

"Well," returned Rathbury, hesitatingly, "I hadn't, up to now. But now—now, after what you've told me, I think I can make one. It seems to me that after Marbury left Aylmore he probably mooned about by himself, that he was decoyed into the Temple, and was there murdered and robbed. There are a lot of queer ins and outs, nooks and corners in that old spot, Mr. Spargo, and the murderer, if he knew his ground well, could easily hide himself until he could get away in the morning. He might be a man who had access to chambers or offices—think how easy it would be for such a man, having once killed and robbed his victim, to lie hid for hours afterwards? For aught we know, the man who murdered Marbury may have been within twenty feet of you when you first saw his dead body that morning. Eh?"

Before Spargo could reply to this suggestion an official entered the room and whispered a few words in the detective's ear.

"Show him in at once," said Rathbury. He turned to Spargo as the man quitted the room and smiled significantly. "Here's somebody wants to tell something about the Marbury case," he remarked. "Let's hope it'll be news worth hearing."

Spargo smiled in his queer fashion.

"It strikes me that you've only got to interest an inquisitive public in order to get news," he said. "The principal thing is to investigate it when you've got it. Who's this, now?"

The official had returned with a dapper-looking gentleman in a frock-coat and silk hat, bearing upon him the

unmistakable stamp of the city man, who inspected Rathbury with deliberation and Spargo with a glance, and being seated turned to the detective as undoubtedly the person he desired to converse with.

"I understand that you are the officer in charge of the Marbury murder case," he observed. "I believe I can give you some valuable information in respect to that. I read the account of the affair in the *Watchman* newspaper this morning, and saw the portrait of the murdered man there, and I was at first inclined to go to the *Watchman* office with my information, but I finally decided to approach the police instead of the Press, regarding the police as being more—more responsible."

"Much obliged to you, sir," said Rathbury, with a glance at Spargo. "Whom have I the pleasure of——"

"My name," replied the visitor, drawing out and laying down a card, "is Myerst—Mr. E. P. Myerst, Secretary of the London and Universal Safe Deposit Company. I may, I suppose, speak with confidence," continued Mr. Myerst, with a side-glance at Spargo. "My information is—confidential."

Rathbury inclined his head and put his fingers together.

"You may speak with every confidence, Mr. Myerst," he answered. "If what you have to tell has any real bearing on the Marbury case, it will probably have to be repeated in public, you know, sir. But at present it will be treated as private."

"It has a very real bearing on the case, I should say," replied Mr. Myerst. "Yes, I should decidedly say so. The fact is that on June 21st at about—to be precise—

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three o'clock in the afternoon, a stranger, who gave the name of John Marbury, and his present address as the Anglo-Orient Hotel, Waterloo, called at our establishment, and asked if he could rent a small safe. He explained to me that he desired to deposit in such a safe a small leather box—which, by the by, was of remarkably ancient appearance—that he had brought with him. I showed him a safe such as he wanted, informed him of the rent, and of the rules of the place, and he engaged the safe, paid the rent for one year in advance, and deposited his leather box—an affair of about a foot square—there and then. After that, having exchanged a remark or two about the altered conditions of London, which, I understood him to say, he had not seen for a great many years, he took his key and his departure. I think there can be no doubt about this being the Mr. Marbury who was found murdered."

"None at all, I should say, Mr. Myerst," said Rathbury. "And I'm much obliged to you for coming here. Now you might tell me a little more, sir. Did Marbury tell you anything about the contents of the box?"

"No. He merely remarked that he wished the greatest care to be taken of it," replied the secretary.

"Didn't give you any hint as to what was in it?" asked Rathbury.

"None. But he was very particular to assure himself that it could not be burnt, nor burgled, nor otherwise molested," replied Mr. Myerst. "He appeared to be greatly relieved when he found that it was impossible for anyone but himself to take his property from his safe."

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“Ah!” said Rathbury, winking at Spargo. “So he would, no doubt. And Marbury himself, sir, now? How did he strike you?”

Mr. Myerst gravely considered this question.

“Mr. Marbury struck me,” he answered at last, “as a man who had probably seen strange places. And before leaving he made, what I will term, a remarkable remark. About—in fact, about his leather box.”

“His leather box?” said Rathbury. “And what was it, sir?”

“This,” replied the secretary. “‘That box,’ he said, ‘is safe now. But it’s been safer. It’s been buried—and deep-down, too—for many and many a year!’”

CHAPTER NINE

THE DEALER IN RARE STAMPS

“Buried—and deep-down, too—for many and many a year,” repeated Mr. Myerst, eyeing his companions with keen glances. “I consider that, gentlemen, a very remarkable remark—very remarkable!”

Rathbury stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat again and began swaying backwards and forwards in his chair. He looked at Spargo. And with his knowledge of men, he knew that all Spargo’s journalistic instincts had been aroused, and that he was keen as mustard to be off on a new scent.

“Remarkable—remarkable, Mr. Myerst!” he assented. “What do you say, Mr. Spargo?”

Spargo turned slowly, and for the first time since Myerst had entered made a careful inspection of him. The inspection lasted several seconds; then Spargo spoke.

“And what did you say to that?” he asked quietly.

Myerst looked from his questioner to Rathbury. And Rathbury thought it time to enlighten the caller.

“I may as well tell you, Mr. Myerst,” he said smilingly, “that this is Mr. Spargo, of the *Watchman*. Mr. Spargo wrote the article about the Marbury case of which you spoke when you came in. Mr. Spargo, you’ll gather,

is deeply interested in this matter—and he and I, in our different capacities, are working together. So—you understand?”

Myerst regarded Spargo in a new light. And while he was so looking at him, Spargo repeated the question he had just put.

“I said—What did you say to that?”

Myerst hesitated.

“Well—er—I don’t think I said anything,” he replied. “Nothing that one might call material, you know.”

“Didn’t ask him what he meant?” suggested Spargo.

“Oh, no—not at all,” replied Myerst.

Spargo got up abruptly from his chair.

“Then you missed one of the finest opportunities I ever heard of!” he said, half-sneeringly. “You might have heard such a story——”

He paused, as if it were not worth while to continue, and turned to Rathbury, who was regarding him with amusement.

“Look here, Rathbury,” he said. “Is it possible to get that box opened?”

“It’ll have to be opened,” answered Rathbury, rising. “It’s got to be opened. It probably contains the clue we want. I’m going to ask Mr. Myerst here to go with me just now to take the first steps about having it opened. I shall have to get an order. We may get the matter through today, but at any rate we’ll have it done tomorrow morning.”

“Can you arrange for me to be present when that comes off?” asked Spargo. “You can—certain?”

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That's all right, Rathbury. Now I'm off, and you'll ring me up or come round if you hear anything, and I'll do the same by you."

And without further word, Spargo went quickly away, and just as quickly returned to the *Watchman* office. There the assistant who had been told off to wait upon his orders during this new crusade met him with a business card.

"This gentleman came in to see you about an hour ago, Mr. Spargo," he said. "He thinks he can tell you something about the Marbury affair, and he said that as he couldn't wait, perhaps you'd step round to his place when you came in."

Spargo took the card and read:

MR. JAMES CRIEDIR,
DEALER IN PHILATELIC RARITIES,
2,021, STRAND.

Spargo put the card in his waistcoat pocket and went out again, wondering why Mr. James Criedir could not, would not, or did not call himself a dealer in rare postage stamps, and so use plain English. He went up Fleet Street and soon found the shop indicated on the card, and his first glance at its exterior showed that whatever business might have been done by Mr. Criedir in the past at that establishment there was to be none done there in the future by him, for there were newly-printed bills in the window announcing that the place was to let. And inside he found a short, portly, elderly man who was superintending the packing-up and removal of the

last of his stock. He turned a bright, enquiring eye on the journalist.

"Mr. Criedir?" said Spargo.

"The same, sir," answered the philatelist. "You are——?"

"Mr. Spargo, of the *Watchman*. You called on me."

Mr. Criedir opened the door of a tiny apartment at the rear of the very little shop and motioned his caller to enter. He followed him in and carefully closed the door.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Spargo," he said genially. "Take a seat, sir—I'm all in confusion here—giving up business, you see. Yes, I called on you. I think, having read the *Watchman* account of that Marbury affair, and having seen the murdered man's photograph in your columns, that I can give you a bit of information."

"Material?" asked Spargo, tersely.

Mr. Criedir cocked one of his bright eyes at his visitor. He coughed drily.

"That's for you to decide—when you've heard it," he said. "I should say, considering everything, that it was material. Well, it's this—I kept open until yesterday—everything as usual, you know—stock in the window and so on—so that anybody who was passing would naturally have thought that the business was going on, though as a matter of fact, I'm retiring—retired," added Mr. Criedir with a laugh, "last night. Now—but won't you take down what I've got to tell you?"

"I am taking it down," answered Spargo. "Every word. In my head."

Mr. Criedir laughed and rubbed his hands.

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"Oh!" he said. "Ah, well, in my young days journalists used to pull out pencil and notebook at the first opportunity. But you modern young men——"

"Just so," agreed Spargo. "This information, now?"

"Well," said Mr. Criedir, "we'll go on then. Yesterday afternoon the man described as Marbury came into my shop. He——"

"What time—exact time?" asked Spargo.

"Two—to the very minute by St. Clement Danes clock," answered Mr. Criedir. "I'd swear twenty affidavits on that point. He was precisely as you've described him—dress, everything—I tell you I knew his photo as soon as I saw it. He was carrying a little box——"

"What sort of box?" said Spargo.

"A queer, old-fashioned, much-worn leather box—a very miniature trunk, in fact," replied Mr. Criedir. "About a foot square; the sort of thing you never see nowadays. It was very much worn; it attracted me for that very reason. He set it on the counter and looked at me. 'You're a dealer in stamps—rare stamps?' he said. 'I am,' I replied. 'I've something here I'd like to show you,' he said, unlocking the box. 'It's——'"

"Stop a bit," said Spargo. "Where did he take the key from with which he unlocked the box?"

"It was one of several which he carried on a split ring, and he took the bunch out of his left-hand trousers pocket," replied Mr. Criedir. "Oh, I keep my eyes open, young gentleman! Well—he opened his box. It seemed to me to be full of papers—at any rate there

were a lot of legal-looking documents on the top, tied up with red tape. To show you how I notice things I saw that the papers were stained with age, and that the red tape was faded to a mere washed-out pink."

"Good—good!" murmured Spargo. "Excellent! Proceed, sir."

"He put his hand under the topmost papers and drew out an envelope," continued Mr. Criedir. "From the envelope he produced an exceedingly rare, exceedingly valuable set of Colonial stamps—the very first ever issued. 'I've just come from Australia,' he said. 'I promised a young friend of mine out there to sell these stamps for him in London, and as I was passing this way I caught sight of your shop. Will you buy 'em, and how much will you give for 'em?'"

"Prompt," muttered Spargo.

"He seemed to me the sort of man who doesn't waste words," agreed Mr. Criedir. "Well, there was no doubt about the stamps, nor about their great value. But I had to explain to him that I was retiring from business that very day, and did not wish to enter into even a single deal, and that, therefore, I couldn't do anything. 'No matter,' he says, 'I daresay there are lots of men in your line of trade—perhaps you can recommend me to a good firm?' 'I could recommend you to a dozen extra-good firms,' I answered. 'But I can do better for you. I'll give you the name and address of a private buyer who, I haven't the least doubt, will be very glad to buy that set from you and will give you a big price.' 'Write it down,' he says, 'and thank you for your trouble.' So I gave him a bit of advice as to the price he ought to

get, and I wrote the name and address of the man I referred to on the back of one of my cards."

"Whose name and address?" asked Spargo.

"Mr. Nicholas Cardlestone, 2, Pilcox Buildings, Middle Temple Lane," replied Mr. Criedir. "Mr. Cardlestone is one of the most enthusiastic and accomplished philatelists in Europe. And I knew he didn't possess that set of stamps."

"I know Mr. Cardlestone," remarked Spargo. "It was at the foot of his stairs that Marbury was found murdered."

"Just so," said Mr. Criedir. "Which makes me think that he was going to see Mr. Cardlestone when he was set upon, murdered, and robbed."

Spargo looked fixedly at the retired stamp-dealer.

"What, going to see an elderly gentleman in his rooms in the Temple, to offer to sell him philatelic rarities at—past midnight?" he said. "I think—not much!"

"All right," replied Mr. Criedir. "You think and argue on modern lines—which are, of course, highly superior. But—how do you account for my having given Marbury Mr. Cardlestone's address and for his having been found dead—murdered—at the foot of Cardlestone's stairs a few hours later?"

"I don't account for it," said Spargo. "I'm trying to."

Mr. Criedir made no comment on this. He looked his visitor up and down for a moment; gathered some idea of his capabilities, and suddenly offered him a cigarette. Spargo accepted it with a laconic word of

thanks, and smoked half-way through it before he spoke again.

"Yes," he said. "I'm trying to account. And I shall account. And I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Criedir, for what you've told me. Now, then, may I ask you a question or two?"

"A thousand!" responded Mr. Criedir with great geniality.

"Very well. Did Marbury say he'd call on Cardlestone?"

"He did. Said he'd call as soon as he could—that day."

"Have you told Cardlestone what you've just told me?"

"I have. But not until an hour ago—on my way back from your office, in fact. I met him in Fleet Street and told him."

"Had he received a call from Marbury?"

"No! Never heard of or seen the man. At least, never heard of him until he heard of the murder. He told me he and his friend, Mr. Elphick, another philatelist, went to see the body, wondering if they could recognize it as any man they'd ever known, but they couldn't."

"I know they did," said Spargo. "I saw 'em at the mortuary. Um! Well—one more question. When Marbury left you, did he put those stamps in his box again, as before?"

"No," replied Mr. Criedir. "He put them in his right-hand breast pocket, and he locked up his old box, and went off swinging it in his left hand."

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Spargo went away down Fleet Street, seeing nobody. He muttered to himself, and he was still muttering when he got into his room at the office. And what he muttered was the same thing, repeated over and over again:

“Six hours—six hours—six hours! Those six hours!”

Next morning the *Watchman* came out with four leaded columns of up-to-date news about the Marbury Case, and right across the top of the four ran a heavy double line of great capitals, black and staring:—

WHO SAW JOHN MARBURY BETWEEN 3.15 P. M. AND 9.15
P. M. ON THE DAY PRECEDING HIS MURDER?

CHAPTER TEN

THE LEATHER BOX

Whether Spargo was sanguine enough to expect that his staring headline would bring him information of the sort he wanted was a secret which he kept to himself. That a good many thousands of human beings must have set eyes on John Marbury between the hours which Spargo set forth in that headline was certain; the problem was—What particular owner or owners of a pair or of many pairs of those eyes would remember him? Why should they remember him? Walters and his wife had reason to remember him; Criedir had reason to remember him; so had Myerst; so had William Webster. But between a quarter past three, when he left the London and Universal Safe Deposit, and a quarter past nine, when he sat down by Webster's side in the lobby of the House of Commons, nobody seemed to have any recollection of him except Mr. Fiskie, the hatter, and he only remembered him faintly, and because Marbury had bought a fashionable cloth cap at his shop. At any rate, by noon of that day, nobody had come forward with any recollection of him. He must have gone West from seeing Myerst, because he bought his cap at Fiskie's; he must eventually have gone South-West, because he turned up at Westminster. But where else did

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he go? What did he do? To whom did he speak? No answer came to these questions.

"That shows," observed young Mr. Ronald Breton, lazing an hour away in Spargo's room at the *Watchman* at that particular hour which is neither noon nor afternoon, wherein even busy men do nothing, "that shows how a chap can go about London as if he were merely an ant that had strayed into another ant-heap than his own. Nobody notices."

"You'd better go and read up a little elementary entomology, Breton," said Spargo. "I don't know much about it myself, but I've a pretty good idea that when an ant walks into the highways and byways of a colony to which he doesn't belong he doesn't survive his intrusion by many seconds."

"Well, you know what I mean," said Breton. "London's an ant-heap, isn't it? One human ant more or less doesn't count. This man Marbury must have gone about a pretty tidy lot during those six hours. He'd ride on a 'bus—almost certain. He'd get into a taxicab—I think that's much more certain, because it would be a novelty to him. He'd want some tea—anyway, he'd be sure to want a drink, and he'd turn in somewhere to get one or the other. He'd buy things in shops—these Colonials always do. He'd go somewhere to get his dinner. He'd—but what's the use of enumeration in this case?"

"A mere piling up of platitudes," answered Spargo.

"What I mean is," continued Breton, "that piles of people must have seen him, and yet it's now hours and hours since your paper came out this morning, and no-

body's come forward to tell anything. And when you come to think of it, why should they? Who'd remember an ordinary man in a grey tweed suit?"

"'An ordinary man in a grey tweed suit,'" repeated Spargo. "Good line. You haven't any copyright in it, remember. It would make a good cross-heading."

Breton laughed. "You're a queer chap, Spargo," he said. "Seriously, do you think you're getting any nearer anything?"

"I'm getting nearer something with everything that's done," Spargo answered. "You can't start on a business like this without evolving something out of it, you know."

"Well," said Breton, "to me there's not so much mystery in it. Mr. Aylmore's explained the reason why my address was found on the body; Criedir, the stamp-man, has explained——"

Spargo suddenly looked up.

"What?" he said sharply.

"Why, the reason of Marbury's being found where he was found," replied Breton. "Of course, I see it all! Marbury was mooning around Fleet Street; he slipped into Middle Temple Lane, late as it was, just to see where old Cardlestone hangs out, and he was set upon and done for. The thing's plain to me. The only thing now is to find who did it."

"Yes, that's it," agreed Spargo. "That's it." He turned over the leaves of the diary which lay on his desk. "By the by," he said, looking up with some interest, "the adjourned inquest is at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. Are you going?"

"I shall certainly go," answered Breton. "What's more, I'm going to take Miss Aylmore and her sister. As the gruesome details were over at the first sitting, and as there'll be nothing but this new evidence tomorrow, and as they've never been in a coroner's court —"

"Mr. Aylmore'll be the principal witness tomorrow," interrupted Spargo. "I suppose he'll be able to tell a lot more than he told—me."

Breton shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't see that there's much more to tell," he said. "But," he added, with a sly laugh, "I suppose you want some more good copy, eh?"

Spargo glanced at his watch, rose, and picked up his hat. "I'll tell you what I want," he said. "I want to know who John Marbury was. That would make good copy. Who he was—twenty—twenty-five—forty years ago. Eh?"

"And you think Mr. Aylmore can tell?" asked Breton.

"Mr. Aylmore," answered Spargo as they walked towards the door, "is the only person I have met so far who has admitted that he knew John Marbury in the —past. But he didn't tell me—much. Perhaps he'll tell the coroner and his jury—more. Now, I'm off. Breton—I've an appointment."

And leaving Breton to find his own way out, Spargo hurried away, jumped into a taxi-cab and speeded to the London and Universal Safe Deposit. At the corner of its building he found Rathbury awaiting him.

"Well?" said Spargo, as he sprang out: "How is it?"

"It's all right," answered Rathbury. "You can be present: I got the necessary permission. As there are no relations known, there'll only be one or two officials and you, and the Safe Deposit people, and myself. Come on—it's about time."

"It sounds," observed Spargo, "like an exhumation."

Rathbury laughed. "Well, we're certainly going to dig up a dead man's secrets," he said. "At least, we may be going to do so. In my opinion, Mr. Spargo, we'll find some clue in this leather box."

Spargo made no answer. They entered the office, to be shown into a room where were already assembled Mr. Myerst, a gentleman who turned out to be the chairman of the company, and the officials of whom Rathbury had spoken. And in another moment Spargo heard the chairman explaining that the company possessed duplicate keys to all safes, and that the proper authorization having been received from the proper authorities, those present would now proceed to the safe recently tenanted by the late Mr. John Marbury, and take from it the property which he himself had deposited there, a small leather box, which they would afterwards bring to that room and cause to be opened in each other's presence.

It seemed to Spargo that there was an unending un-locking of bolts and bars before he and his fellow-processionists came to the safe so recently rented by the late Mr. John Marbury, now undoubtedly deceased. And at first sight of it, he saw that it was so small an affair that it seemed ludicrous to imagine that it could contain anything of any importance. In fact, it looked

to be no more than a plain wooden locker, one amongst many in a small strong room: it reminded Spargo irresistibly of the locker in which, in his school days, he had kept his personal belongings and the jam tarts, sausage rolls, and hardbake smuggled in from the tuck-shop. Marbury's name had been newly painted upon it; the paint was scarcely dry. But when the wooden door—the front door, as it were, of this temple of mystery, had been solemnly opened by the chairman, a formidable door of steel was revealed, and expectation still leapt in the bosoms of the beholders.

“The duplicate key, Mr. Myerst, if you please,” commanded the chairman, “the duplicate key!”

Myerst, who was fully as solemn as his principal, produced a curious-looking key: the chairman lifted his hand as if he were about to christen a battleship: the steel door swung slowly back. And there, in a two-foot square cavity, lay the leather box.

It struck Spargo as they filed back to the secretary's room that the procession became more funereal-like than ever. First walked the chairman, abreast with the high official, who had brought the necessary authorization from the all-powerful quarter; then came Myerst carrying the box: followed two other gentlemen, both legal lights, charged with watching official and police interests; Rathbury and Spargo brought up the rear. He whispered something of his notions to the detective; Rathbury nodded a comprehensive understanding.

“Let's hope we're going to see—something!” he said.

In the secretary's room a man waited who touched his forelock respectfully as the heads of the procession en-

tered. Myerst set the box on the table: the man made a musical jingle of keys: the other members of the procession gathered round.

"As we naturally possess no key to this box," announced the chairman in grave tones, "it becomes our duty to employ professional assistance in opening it. Jobson!"

He waved a hand, and the man of the keys stepped forward with alacrity. He examined the lock of the box with a knowing eye; it was easy to see that he was anxious to fall upon it. While he considered matters, Spargo looked at the box. It was pretty much what it had been described to him as being; a small, square box of old cow-hide, very strongly made, much worn and tarnished, fitted with a handle projecting from the lid, and having the appearance of having been hidden away somewhere for many a long day.

There was a click, a spring: Jobson stepped back.

"That's it, if you please, sir," he said.

The chairman motioned to the high official.

"If you would be good enough to open the box, sir," he said. "Our duty is now concluded."

As the high official laid his hand on the lid the other men gathered round with craning necks and expectant eyes. The lid was lifted: somebody sighed deeply. And Spargo pushed his own head and eyes nearer.

The box was empty!

Empty, as anything that can be empty is empty! thought Spargo: there was literally nothing in it. They were all staring into the interior of a plain, time-worn little receptacle, lined out with old-fashioned chintz

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stuff, such as our Mid-Victorian fore-fathers were familiar with, and containing—nothing.

“God bless my soul!” exclaimed the chairman. “This is—dear me!—why, there is nothing in the box!”

“That,” remarked the high official, drily, “appears to be obvious.”

The chairman looked at the secretary.

“I understood the box was valuable, Mr. Myerst,” he said, with the half-injured air of a man who considers himself to have been robbed of an exceptionally fine treat. “Valuable!”

Myerst coughed.

“I can only repeat what I have already said, Sir Benjamin,” he answered. “The—er late Mr. Marbury spoke of the deposit as being of great value to him; he never permitted it out of his hand until he placed it in the safe. He appeared to regard it as of the greatest value.”

“But we understand from the evidence of Mr. Criedir, given to the *Watchman* newspaper, that it was full of papers and—and other articles,” said the chairman. “Criedir saw papers in it about an hour before it was brought here.”

Myerst spread out his hands.

“I can only repeat what I have said, Sir Benjamin,” he answered. “I know nothing more.”

“But why should a man deposit an empty box?” began the chairman. “I——”

The high official interposed.

“That the box is empty is certain,” he observed. “Did you ever handle it yourself, Mr. Myerst?”

Myerst smiled in a superior fashion.

"I have already observed, sir, that from the time the deceased entered this room until the moment he placed the box in the safe which he rented, the box was never out of his hands," he replied.

Then there was silence. At last the high official turned to the chairman.

"Very well," he said. "We've made the enquiry. Rathbury, take the box away with you and lock it up at the Yard."

So Spargo went out with Rathbury and the box; and saw excellent, if mystifying, material for the article which had already become the daily feature of his paper.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MR. AYLMORE IS QUESTIONED

It seemed to Spargo as he sat listening to the proceedings at the adjourned inquest next day that the whole story of what was now world-famous as the Middle Temple Murder Case was being reiterated before him for the thousandth time. There was not a detail of the story with which he had not become familiar to fulness. The first proceeding before the coroner had been of a merely formal nature; these were thorough and exhaustive; the representative of the Crown and twelve good men and true of the City of London were there to hear and to find out and to arrive at a conclusion as to how the man known as John Marbury came by his death. And although he knew all about it, Spargo found himself tabulating the evidence in a professional manner, and noting how each successive witness contributed, as it were, a chapter to the story. The story itself ran quite easily, naturally, consecutively—you could make it in sections. And Spargo, sitting merely to listen, made them:

1. The Temple porter and Constable Driscoll proved the finding of the body.
2. The police surgeon testified as to the cause of death—the man had been struck down from be-

hind by a blow, a terrible blow—from some heavy instrument, and had died immediately.

3. The police and the mortuary officials proved that when the body was examined nothing was found in the clothing but the now famous scrap of grey paper.
4. Rathbury proved that by means of the dead man's new fashionable cloth cap, bought at Fiskie's well-known shop in the West-End, he traced Marbury to the Anglo-Orient Hotel in the Waterloo District.
5. Mr. and Mrs. Walters gave evidence of the arrival of Marbury at the Anglo-Orient Hotel, and of his doings while he was in and about there.
6. The purser of the ss. *Wambarino* proved that Marbury sailed from Melbourne to Southampton on that ship, excited no remark, behaved himself like any other well-regulated passenger, and left the *Wambarino* at Southampton early in the morning of what was to be the last day of his life in just the ordinary manner.
7. Mr. Criedir gave evidence of his rencontre with Marbury in the matter of the stamps.
8. Mr. Myerst told of Marbury's visit to the Safe Deposit, and further proved that the box which he placed there proved, on official examination, to be empty.
9. William Webster re-told the story of his encounter with Marbury in one of the vestibules of the House of Commons, and of his witnessing the meeting between him and the gentleman whom

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he (Webster) now knew to be Mr. Aylmore, a Member of Parliament.

All this led up to the appearance of Mr. Aylmore, M.P., in the witness-box. And Spargo knew and felt that it was that appearance for which the crowded court was waiting. Thanks to his own vivid and realistic specials in the *Watchman*, everybody there had already become well and thoroughly acquainted with the mass of evidence represented by the nine witnesses who had been in the box before Mr. Aylmore entered it. They were familiar, too, with the facts which Mr. Aylmore had permitted Spargo to print after the interview at the club, which Ronald Breton arranged. Why, then, the extraordinary interest which the Member of Parliament's appearance aroused? For everybody was extraordinarily interested; from the Coroner downwards to the last man who had managed to squeeze himself into the last available inch of the public gallery, all who were there wanted to hear and see the man who met Marbury under such dramatic circumstances, and who went to his hotel with him, hobnobbed with him, gave him advice, walked out of the hotel with him for a stroll from which Marbury never returned. Spargo knew well why the interest was so keen—everybody knew that Aylmore was the only man who could tell the court anything really pertinent about Marbury; who he was, what he was after; what his life had been.

He looked round the court as the Member of Parliament entered the witness-box—a tall, handsome, perfectly-groomed man, whose beard was only slightly tinged with grey, whose figure was as erect as a well-drilled

soldier's, who carried about him an air of conscious power. Aylmore's two daughters sat at a little distance away, opposite Spargo, with Ronald Breton in attendance upon them; Spargo had encountered their glance as they entered the court, and they had given him a friendly nod and smile. He had watched them from time to time; it was plain to him that they regarded the whole affair as a novel sort of entertainment; they might have been idlers in some Eastern bazaar, listening to the unfolding of many tales from the professional tale-tellers. Now, as their father entered the box, Spargo looked at them again; he saw nothing more than a little heightening of colour in their cheeks, a little brightening of their eyes.

"All that they feel," he thought, "is a bit of extra excitement at the idea that their father is mixed up in this delightful mystery. Um! Well—now how much is he mixed up?"

And he turned to the witness-box and from that moment never took his eyes off the man who now stood in it. For Spargo had ideas about the witness which he was anxious to develop.

The folk who expected something immediately sensational in Mr. Aylmore's evidence were disappointed. Aylmore, having been sworn, and asked a question or two by the Coroner, requested permission to tell, in his own way, what he knew of the dead man and of this sad affair; and having received that permission, he went on in a calm, unimpassioned manner to repeat precisely what he had told Spargo. It sounded a very plain, ordinary story. He had known Marbury many years

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ago. He had lost sight of him for—oh, quite twenty years. He had met him accidentally in one of the vestibules of the House of Commons on the evening preceding the murder. Marbury had asked his advice. Having no particular duty, and willing to do an old acquaintance a good turn, he had gone back to the Anglo-Orient Hotel with Marbury, had remained awhile with him in his room, examining his Australian diamonds, and had afterwards gone out with him. He had given him the advice he wanted; they had strolled across Waterloo Bridge; shortly afterwards they had parted. That was all he knew.

The court, the public, Spargo, everybody there, knew all this already. It had been in print, under a big headline, in the *Watchman*. Aylmore had now told it again; having told it, he seemed to consider that his next step was to leave the box and the court, and after a perfunctory question or two from the Coroner and the foreman of the jury he made a motion as if to step down. But Spargo, who had been aware since the beginning of the enquiry of the presence of a certain eminent counsel who represented the Treasury, cocked his eye in that gentleman's direction, and was not surprised to see him rise in his well-known, apparently indifferent fashion, fix his monocle in his right eye, and glance at the tall figure in the witness-box.

"The fun is going to begin," muttered Spargo.

The Treasury representative looked from Aylmore to the Coroner and made a jerky bow; from the Coroner to Aylmore and straightened himself. He looked like a man who is going to ask indifferent questions about the

state of the weather, or how Smith's wife was last time you heard of her, or if stocks are likely to rise or fall. But Spargo had heard this man before, and he knew many signs of his in voice and manner and glance.

"I want to ask you a few questions, Mr. Aylmore, about your acquaintanceship with the dead man. It was an acquaintanceship of some time ago?" began the suave, seemingly careless voice.

"A considerable time ago," answered Aylmore.

"How long—roughly speaking?"

"I should say from twenty to twenty-two or three years."

"Never saw him during that time until you met accidentally in the way you have described to us?"

"Never."

"Ever heard from him?"

"No."

"Ever heard of him?"

"No."

"But when you met, you knew each other at once?"

"Well—almost at once."

"Almost at once. Then, I take it, you were very well known to each other twenty or twenty-two years ago?"

"We were—yes, well known to each other."

"Close friends?"

"I said we were acquaintances."

"Acquaintances. What was his name when you knew him at that time?"

"His name? It was—Marbury."

"Marbury—the same name. Where did you know him?"

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"I—oh, here in London."

"What was he?"

"Do you mean—what was his occupation?"

"What was his occupation?"

"I believe he was concerned in financial matters."

"Concerned in financial matters. Had you dealings with him?"

"Well, yes—on occasions."

"What was his business address in London?"

"I can't remember that."

"What was his private address?"

"That I never knew."

"Where did you transact your business with him?"

"Well, we met, now and then."

"Where? What place, office, resort?"

"I can't remember particular places. Sometimes—in the City."

"In the City. Where in the City? Mansion House, or Lombard Street, or St. Paul's Churchyard, or the Old Bailey, or where?"

"I have recollections of meeting him outside the Stock Exchange."

"Oh! Was he a member of that institution?"

"Not that I know of."

"Were you?"

"Certainly not!"

"What were the dealings that you had with him?"

"Financial dealings—small ones."

"How long did your acquaintanceship with him last—what period did it extend over?"

"I should say about six months to nine months."

"No more?"

"Certainly no more."

"It was quite a slight acquaintanceship, then?"

"Oh, quite!"

"And yet, after losing sight of this merely slight acquaintance for over twenty years, you, on meeting him, take great interest in him?"

"Well, I was willing to do him a good turn, I was interested in what he told me the other evening."

"I see. Now you will not object to my asking you a personal question or two. You are a public man, and the facts about the lives of public men are more or less public property. You are represented in this work of popular reference as coming to this country in 1902, from Argentina, where you made a considerable fortune. You have told us, however, that you were in London, acquainted with Marbury, about the years, say 1890 to 1892. Did you then leave England soon after knowing Marbury?"

"I did. I left England in 1891 or 1892—I am not sure which."

"We are wanting to be very sure about this matter, Mr. Aylmore. We want to solve the important question—who is, who was John Marbury, and how did he come by his death? You seem to be the only available person who knows anything about him. What was your business before you left England?"

"I was interested in financial affairs."

"Like Marbury. Where did you carry on your business?"

"In London, of course."

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“At what address?”

For some moments Aylmore had been growing more and more restive. His brow had flushed; his moustache had begun to twitch. And now he squared his shoulders and faced his questioner defiantly.

“I resent these questions about my private affairs!” he snapped out.

“Possibly. But I must put them. I repeat my last question.”

“And I refuse to answer it.”

“Then I ask you another. Where did you live in London at the time you are telling us of, when you knew John Marbury?”

“I refuse to answer that question also!”

The Treasury Counsel sat down and looked at the Coroner.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE NEW WITNESS

The voice of the Coroner, bland, suave, deprecating, broke the silence. He was addressing the witness.

"I am sure, Mr. Aylmore," he said, "there is no wish to trouble you with unnecessary questions. But we are here to get at the truth of this matter of John Marbury's death, and as you are the only witness we have had who knew him personally——"

Aylmore turned impatiently to the Coroner.

"I have every wish to respect your authority, sir!" he exclaimed. "And I have told you all that I know of Marbury and of what happened when I met him the other evening. But I resent being questioned on my private affairs of twenty years ago—I very much resent it! Any question that is really pertinent I will answer, but I will not answer questions that seem to me wholly foreign to the scope of this enquiry."

The Treasury Counsel rose again. His manner had become of the quietest, and Spargo again became keenly attentive.

"Perhaps I can put a question or two to Mr. Aylmore which will not yield him offence," he remarked drily. He turned once more to the witness, regarding him as if with interest. "Can you tell us of any person now

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living who knew Marbury in London at the time under discussion—twenty to twenty-two or three years ago?" he asked.

Aylmore shook his head angrily.

"No, I can't," he replied.

"And yet you and he must have had several business acquaintances at that time who knew you both?"

"Possibly—at that time. But when I returned to England my business and my life lay in different directions to those of that time. I don't know of anybody who knew Marbury then—anybody."

The Counsel turned to a clerk who sat behind him, whispered to him; Spargo saw the clerk make a sidelong motion of his head towards the door of the court. The Counsel looked again at the witness.

"One more question. You told the court a little time since that you parted with Marbury on the evening preceding his death at the end of Waterloo Bridge—at, I think you said, a quarter to twelve."

"About that time."

"And at that place?"

"Yes."

"That is all I want to ask you, Mr. Aylmore—just now," said the Counsel. He turned to the Coroner. "I am going to ask you, sir, at this point to call a witness who has volunteered certain evidence to the police authorities this morning. That evidence is of a very important nature, and I think that this is the stage at which it ought to be given to you and the jury. If you would be pleased to direct that David Lyell be called _____,"

Spargo turned instinctively to the door, having seen the clerk who had sat behind the Treasury Counsel make his way there. There came into view, ushered by the clerk, a smart-looking, alert, self-confident young man, evidently a Scotsman, who, on the name of David Lyell being called, stepped jauntily and readily into the place which the member of Parliament just vacated. He took the oath—Scotch fashion—with the same readiness and turned easily to the Treasury Counsel. And Spargo, glancing quickly round, saw that the court was breathless with anticipation, and that its anticipation was that the new witness was going to tell something which related to the evidence just given by Aylmore.

“Your name is David Lyell?”

“That is my name, sir.”

“And you reside at 23, Cumbrae Side, Kilmarnock, Scotland?”

“I do.”

“What are you, Mr. Lyell?”

“Traveller, sir, for the firm of Messrs. Stevenson, Robertson & Soutar, distillers, of Kilmarnock.”

“Your duties take you, I think, over to Paris occasionally?”

“They do—once every six weeks I go to Paris.”

“On the evening of June 21st last were you in London on your way to Paris?”

“I was.”

“I believe you stayed at De Keyser’s Hotel, at the Blackfriars end of the Embankment?”

“I did—it’s handy for the continental trains.”

“About half-past eleven, or a little later, that evening,

did you go along the Embankment, on the Temple Gardens side, for a walk?"

"I did, sir. I'm a bad sleeper, and it's a habit of mine to take a walk of half an hour or so last thing before I go to bed."

"How far did you walk?"

"As far as Waterloo Bridge."

"Always on the Temple side?"

"Just so, sir—straight along on that side."

"Very good. When you got close to Waterloo Bridge, did you meet anybody you knew?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Mr. Aylmore, the Member of Parliament."

Spargo could not avoid a glance at the two sisters. The elder's head was averted; the younger was staring at the witness steadily. And Breton was nervously tapping his fingers on the crown of his shining silk hat.

"Mr. Aylmore, the Member of Parliament," repeated the Counsel's suave, clear tones. "Oh! And how did you come to recognize Mr. Aylmore, Member of Parliament?"

"Well, sir, in this way. At home, I'm the secretary of our Liberal Ward Club, and last year we had a demonstration, and it fell to me to arrange with the principal speakers. I got Mr. Aylmore to come and speak, and naturally I met him several times, in London and in Scotland."

"So that you knew him quite well?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Do you see him now, Mr. Lyell?"

Lyell smiled and half turned in the box.

"Why, of course!" he answered. "There is Mr. Aylmore."

"There is Mr. Aylmore. Very good. Now we go on. You met Mr. Aylmore close to Waterloo Bridge? How close?"

"Well, sir, to be exact, Mr. Aylmore came down the steps from the bridge on to the Embankment."

"Alone?"

"No."

"Who was with him?"

"A man, sir."

"Did you know the man?"

"No. But seeing who he was with, I took a good look at him. I haven't forgotten his face."

"You haven't forgotten his face. Mr. Lyell—has anything recalled that face to you within this last day or two?"

"Yes, sir, indeed!"

"What?"

"The picture of the man they say was murdered—John Marbury."

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm as certain, sir, as that my name's what it is."

"It is your belief that Mr. Aylmore, when you met him, was accompanied by the man who, according to the photographs, was John Marbury?"

"It is, sir!"

"Very well. Now, having seen Mr. Aylmore and his companion, what did you do?"

"Oh, I just turned and walked after them."

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"You walked after them? They were going eastward, then?"

"They were walking by the way I'd come."

"You followed them eastward?"

"I did—I was going back to the hotel, you see."

"What were they doing?"

"Talking uncommonly earnestly, sir."

"How far did you follow them?"

"I followed them until they came to the Embankment lodge of Middle Temple Lane, sir."

"And then?"

"Why, sir, they turned in there, and I went straight on to De Keyser's, and to my bed."

There was a deeper silence in court at that moment than at any other period of the long day, and it grew still deeper when the quiet, keen voice put the next question.

"You swear on your oath that you saw Mr. Aylmore take his companion into the Temple by the Embankment entrance of Middle Temple Lane on the occasion in question?"

"I do! I could swear no other, sir."

"Can you tell us, as near as possible, what time that would be?"

"Yes. It was, to a minute or so, about five minutes past twelve."

The Treasury Counsel nodded to the Coroner, and the Coroner, after a whispered conference with the foreman of the jury, looked at the witness.

"You have only just given this information to the police, I understand?" he said.

“Yes, sir. I have been in Paris, and in Amiens, and I only returned by this morning’s boat. As soon as I had read all the news in the papers—the English papers—and seen the dead man’s photographs I determined to tell the police what I knew, and I went to New Scotland Yard as soon as I got to London this morning.”

Nobody else wanted to ask Mr. David Lyell any questions, and he stepped down. And Mr. Aylmore suddenly came forward again, seeking the Coroner’s attention.

“May I be allowed to make an explanation, sir?” he began. “I——”

But the Treasury Counsel was on his feet, this time stern and implacable. “I would point out, sir, that you have had Mr. Aylmore in the box, and that he was not then at all ready to give explanations, or even to answer questions,” he said. “And before you allow him to make any explanation now, I ask you to hear another witness whom I wish to interpose at this stage. That witness is——”

Mr. Aylmore turned almost angrily to the Coroner.

“After the evidence of the last witness, I think I have a right to be heard at once!” he said with emphasis. “As matters stand at present, it looks as if I had trifled, sir, with you and the jury, whereas if I am allowed to make an explanation——”

“I must respectfully ask that before Mr. Aylmore is allowed to make any explanation, the witness I have referred to is heard,” said the Treasury Counsel sternly. “There are weighty reasons.”

“I am afraid you must wait a little, Mr. Aylmore, if

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you wish to give an explanation," said the Coroner. He turned to the Counsel. "Who is this other witness?" he asked.

Aylmore stepped back. And Spargo noticed that the younger of his two daughters was staring at him with an anxious expression. There was no distrust of her father in her face; she was anxious. She, too, slowly turned to the next witness. This man was the porter of the Embankment lodge of Middle Temple Lane. The Treasury Counsel put a straight question to him at once.

"You see that gentleman," he said, pointing to Aylmore. "Do you know him as an inmate of the Temple?"

The man stared at Aylmore, evidently confused.

"Why, certainly, sir!" he answered. "Quite well, sir."

"Very good. And now—what name do you know him by?"

The man grew evidently more bewildered.

"Name, sir. Why, Mr. Anderson, sir!" he replied. "Mr. Anderson!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

UNDER SUSPICION

A distinct, uncontrollable murmur of surprise ran round the packed court as this man in the witness-box gave this answer. It signified many things—that there were people present who had expected some such dramatic development; that there were others present who had not; that the answer itself was only a prelude to further developments. And Spargo, looking narrowly about him, saw that the answer had aroused different feelings in Aylmore's two daughters. The elder one had dropped her face until it was quite hidden; the younger was sitting bolt upright, staring at her father in utter and genuine bewilderment. And for the first time, Aylmore made no response to her.

But the course of things was going steadily forward. There was no stopping the Treasury Counsel now; he was going to get at some truth in his own merciless fashion. He had exchanged one glance with the Coroner, had whispered a word to the solicitor who sat close by him, and now he turned again to the witness.

"So you know that gentleman—make sure now—as Mr. Anderson, an inmate of the Temple?"

"Yes, sir."

"You don't know him by any other name?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"How long have you known him by that name?"

"I should say two or three years, sir."

"See him go in and out regularly?"

"No, sir—not regularly."

"How often, then?"

"Now and then, sir—perhaps once a week."

"Tell us what you know of Mr. Anderson's goings-in-and-out."

"Well, sir, I might see him two nights running; then I mightn't see him again for perhaps a week or two. Irregular, as you might say, sir."

"You say 'nights.' Do I understand that you never see Mr. Anderson except at night?"

"Yes, sir. I've never seen him except at night. Always about the same time, sir."

"What time?"

"Just about midnight, sir."

"Very well. Do you remember the midnight of June 21st-22nd?"

"I do, sir."

"Did you see Mr. Anderson enter then?"

"Yes, sir, just after twelve."

"Was he alone?"

"No, sir; there was another gentleman with him."

"Remember anything about that other gentleman?"

"Nothing, sir, except that I noticed as they walked through, that the other gentleman had grey clothes on."

"Had grey clothes on. You didn't see his face?"

"Not to remember it, sir. I don't remember anything but what I've told you, sir."

"That is that the other gentleman wore a grey suit. Where did Mr. Anderson and this gentleman in the grey suit go when they'd passed through?"

"Straight up the Lane, sir."

"Do you know where Mr. Anderson's rooms in the Temple are?"

"Not exactly, sir, but I understood in Fountain Court."

"Now, on that night in question, did Mr. Anderson leave again by your lodge?"

"No, sir."

"You heard of the discovery of the body of a dead man in Middle Temple Lane next morning?"

"I did, sir."

"Did you connect that man with the gentleman in the grey suit?"

"No, sir, I didn't. It never occurred to me. A lot of the gentlemen who live in the Temple bring friends in late of nights; I never gave the matter any particular thought."

"Never mentioned it to anybody until now, when you were sent for to come here?"

"No, sir, never, to anybody."

"And you have never known the gentleman standing there as anybody but Mr. Anderson?"

"No, sir, never heard any other name but Anderson."

The Coroner glanced at the Counsel.

"I think this may be a convenient opportunity for Mr. Aylmore to give the explanation he offered a few minutes ago," he said. "Do you suggest anything?"

"I suggest, sir," that if Mr. Aylmore desires to give any explanation he should return to the witness-box and submit himself to examination again on his oath," replied the Counsel. "The matter is in your hands."

The Coroner turned to Aylmore.

"Do you object to that?" he asked.

Aylmore stepped boldly forward and into the box.

"I object to nothing," he said in clear tones, "except to being asked to reply to questions about matters of the past which have not and cannot have anything to do with this case. Ask me what questions you like, arising out of the evidence of the last two witnesses, and I will answer them so far as I see myself justified in doing so. Ask me questions about matters of twenty years ago, and I shall answer them or not as I see fit. And I may as well say that I will take all the consequences of my silence or my speech."

The Treasury Counsel rose again.

"Very well, Mr. Aylmore," he said. "I will put certain questions to you. You heard the evidence of David Lyell?"

"I did."

"Was that quite true as regards yourself?"

"Quite true—absolutely true."

"And you heard that of the last witness. Was that also true?"

"Equally true."

"Then you admit that the evidence you gave this morning, before these witnesses came on the scene, was not true?"

"No, I do not! Most emphatically I do not. It was true."

"True? You told me, on oath, that you parted from John Marbury on Waterloo Bridge!"

"Pardon me, I said nothing of the sort. I said that from the Anglo-Orient Hotel we strolled across Waterloo Bridge, and that shortly afterwards we parted—I did not say where we parted. I see there is a shorthand writer here who is taking everything down—ask him if that is not exactly what I said?"

A reference to the stenographer proved Aylmore to be right, and the Treasury Counsel showed plain annoyance.

"Well, at any rate, you so phrased your answer that nine persons out of ten would have understood that you parted from Marbury in the open streets after crossing Waterloo Bridge," he said. "Now—?"

Aylmore smiled.

"I am not responsible for the understanding of nine people out of ten any more than I am for your understanding," he said, with a sneer. "I said what I now repeat—Marbury and I walked across Waterloo Bridge, and shortly afterwards we parted. I told you the truth."

"Indeed! Perhaps you will continue to tell us the truth. Since you have admitted that the evidence of the last two witnesses is absolutely correct, perhaps you will tell us exactly where you and Marbury did part?"

"I will—willingly. We parted at the door of my chambers in Fountain Court."

"Then—to reiterate—it was you who took Marbury into the Temple that night?"

"It was certainly I who took Marbury into the Temple that night."

There was another murmur amongst the crowded benches. Here at any rate was fact—solid, substantial fact. And Spargo began to see a possible course of events which he had not anticipated.

"That is a candid admission, Mr. Aylmore. I suppose you see a certain danger to yourself in making it."

"I need not say whether I do or I do not. I have made it."

"Very good. Why did you not make it before?"

"For my own reasons. I told you as much as I considered necessary for the purpose of this enquiry. I have virtually altered nothing now. I asked to be allowed to make a statement, to give an explanation, as soon as Mr. Lyell had left this box: I was not allowed to do so. I am willing to make it now."

"Make it then."

"It is simply this," said Aylmore, turning to the Coroner. "I have found it convenient, during the past three years, to rent a simple set of chambers in the Temple, where I could occasionally—very occasionally, as a rule—go late at night. I also found it convenient, for my own reasons—with which, I think, no one has anything to do—to rent those chambers under the name of Mr. Anderson. It was to my chambers that Marbury accompanied me for a few moments on the midnight with which we are dealing. He was not in them more than five minutes at the very outside: I parted from him

at my outer door, and I understood that he would leave the Temple by the way we had entered and would drive or walk straight back to his hotel. That is the whole truth. I wish to add that I ought perhaps to have told all this at first. I had reasons for not doing so. I told what I considered necessary, that I parted from Marbury, leaving him well and alive, soon after midnight."

"What reasons were or are they which prevented you from telling all this at first?" asked the Treasury Counsel.

"Reasons which are private to me."

"Will you tell them to the court?"

"No!"

"Then will you tell us why Marbury went with you to the chambers in Fountain Court which you tenant under the name of Anderson?"

"Yes. To fetch a document which I had in my keeping, and had kept for him for twenty years or more?"

"A document of importance?"

"Of very great importance."

"He would have it on him when he was—as we believe he was—murdered and robbed?"

"He had it on him when he left me."

"Will you tell us what it was?"

"Certainly not!"

"In fact, you won't tell us any more than you choose to tell?"

"I have told you all I can tell of the events of that night."

"Then I am going to ask you a very pertinent question. Is it not a fact that you know a great deal more

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about John Marbury than you have told this court?"

"That I shall not answer."

"Is it not a fact that you could, if you would, tell this court more about John Marbury and your acquaintance-ship with him twenty years ago?"

"I also decline to answer that."

The Treasury Counsel made a little movement of his shoulders and turned to the Coroner.

"I should suggest, sir, that you adjourn this enquiry," he said quietly.

"For a week," assented the Coroner, turning to the jury.

The crowd surged out of the court, chattering, murmuring, exclaiming—spectators, witnesses, jurymen, reporters, legal folk, police folk, all mixed up together. And Spargo, elbowing his own way out, and busily reckoning up the value of the new complexions put on everything by the day's work, suddenly felt a hand laid on his arm. Turning he found himself gazing at Jessie Aylmore.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SILVER TICKET

With a sudden instinct of protection, Spargo quickly drew the girl aside from the struggling crowd, and within a moment had led her into a quiet by-street. He looked down at her as she stood recovering her breath.

"Yes?" he said quietly.

Jessie Aylmore looked up at him, smiling faintly.

"I want to speak to you," she said. "I must speak to you."

"Yes," said Spargo. "But—the others? Your sister?—Breton?"

"I left them on purpose to speak to you," she answered. "They knew I did. I am well accustomed to looking after myself."

Spargo moved down the by-street, motioning his companion to move with him.

"Tea," he said, "is what you want. I know a queer, old-fashioned place close by here where you can get the best China tea in London. Come and have some."

Jessie Aylmore smiled and followed her guide obediently. And Spargo said nothing, marching stolidly along with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, his fingers playing soundless tunes outside, until he had in-

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stalled himself and his companion in a quiet nook in the old tea-house he had told her of, and had given an order for tea and hot tea-cakes to a waitress who evidently knew him. Then he turned to her.

"You want," he said, "to talk to me about your father."

"Yes," she answered. "I do."

"Why?" asked Spargo.

The girl gave him a searching look.

"Ronald Breton says you're the man who's written all those special articles in the *Watchman* about the Marbury case," she answered. "Are you?"

"I am," said Spargo.

"Then you're a man of great influence," she went on. "You can stir the public mind. Mr. Spargo—what are you going to write about my father and today's proceedings?"

Spargo signed to her to pour out the tea which had just arrived. He seized, without ceremony, upon a piece of the hot buttered tea-cake, and bit a great lump out of it.

"Frankly," he mumbled, speaking with his mouth full, "frankly, I don't know. I don't know—yet. But I'll tell you this—it's best to be candid—I shouldn't allow myself to be prejudiced or biassed in making up my conclusions by anything that you may say to me. Understand?"

Jessie Aylmore took a sudden liking to Spargo because of the unconventionality and brusqueness of his manners.

"I'm not wanting to prejudice or bias you," she said.

"All I want is that you should be very sure before you say—anything."

"I'll be sure," said Spargo. "Don't bother. Is the tea all right?"

"Beautiful!" she answered, with a smile that made Spargo look at her again. "Delightful! Mr. Spargo, tell me!—what did you think about—about what has just happened?"

Spargo, regardless of the fact that his fingers were liberally ornamented with butter, lifted a hand and rubbed his always untidy hair. Then he ate more tea-cake and gulped more tea.

"Look here!" he said suddenly. "I'm no great hand at talking. I can write pretty decently when I've a good story to tell, but I don't talk an awful lot, because I never can express what I mean unless I've got a pen in my hand. Frankly, I find it hard to tell you what I think. When I write my article this evening, I'll get all these things marshalled in proper form, and I shall write clearly about 'em. But I'll tell you one thing I do think—I wish your father had made a clean breast of things to me at first, when he gave me that interview, or had told everything when he first went into that box."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because he's now set up an atmosphere of doubt and suspicion around himself. People'll think—Heaven knows what they'll think! They already know that he knows more about Marbury than he'll tell, that——"

"But does he?" she interrupted quickly. "Do you think he does?"

"Yes!" replied Spargo, with emphasis. "I do. A

lot more! If he had only been explicit at first—however, he wasn't. Now it's done. As things stand—look here, does it strike you that your father is in a very serious position?"

"Serious?" she exclaimed.

"Dangerous! Here's the fact—he's admitted that he took Marbury to his rooms in the Temple that midnight. Well, next morning Marbury's found robbed and murdered in an entry, not fifty yards off!"

"Does anybody suppose that my father would murder him for the sake of robbing him of whatever he had on him?" she laughed scornfully. "My father is a very wealthy man, Mr. Spargo."

"May be," answered Spargo. "But millionaires have been known to murder men who held secrets."

"Secrets!" she exclaimed.

"Have some more tea," said Spargo, nodding at the teapot. "Look here—this way it is. The theory that people—some people—will build up (I won't say that it hasn't suggested itself to me) is this:—There's some mystery about the relationship, acquaintanceship, connection, call it what you like, of your father and Marbury twenty odd years ago. Must be. There's some mystery about your father's life, twenty odd years ago. Must be— or else he'd have answered those questions. Very well. 'Ha, ha!' says the general public. 'Now we have it!' 'Marbury,' says the general public, 'was a man who had a hold on Aylmore. He turned up. Aylmore trapped him into the Temple, killed him to preserve his own secret. and robbed him of all he had on him as a blind.' Eh?"

"You think—people will say that?" she exclaimed.

"Cock-sure! They're saying it. Heard half a dozen of 'em say it, in more or less elegant fashion as I came out of that court. Of course, they'll say it. Why, what else could they say?"

For a moment Jessie Aylmore sat looking silently into her tea-cup. Then she turned her eyes on Spargo, who immediately manifested a new interest in what remained of the tea-cakes.

"Is that what you're going to say in your article to-night?" she asked, quietly.

"No!" replied Spargo, promptly. "It isn't. I'm going to sit on the fence tonight. Besides, the case is *sub judice*. All I'm going to do is to tell, in my way, what took place at the inquest."

The girl impulsively put her hand across the table and laid it on Spargo's big fist.

"Is it what you think?" she asked in a low voice.

"Honour bright, no!" exclaimed Spargo. "It isn't—it isn't! I don't think it. I think there's a most extraordinary mystery at the bottom of Marbury's death, and I think your father knows an enormous lot about Marbury that he won't tell, but I'm certain sure that he neither killed Marbury nor knows anything whatever about his death. And as I'm out to clear this mystery up, and mean to do it, nothing'll make me more glad than to clear your father. I say, do have some more tea-cake? We'll have fresh ones—and fresh tea."

"No, thank you," she said smiling. "And thank you for what you've just said. I'm going now, Mr. Spargo. You've done me good."

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"Oh, rot!" exclaimed Spargo. "Nothing—nothing! I've just told you what I'm thinking. You must go? . . ."

He saw her into a taxi-cab presently, and when she had gone stood vacantly staring after the cab until a hand clapped him smartly on the shoulder. Turning, he found Rathbury grinning at him.

"All right, Mr. Spargo, I saw you!" he said. "Well, it's a pleasant change to squire young ladies after being all day in that court. Look here, are you going to start your writing just now?"

"I'm not going to start my writing as you call it, until after I've dined at seven o'clock and given myself time to digest my modest dinner," answered Spargo. "What is it?"

"Come back with me and have another look at that blessed leather box," said Rathbury. "I've got it in my room, and I'd like to examine it for myself. Come on!"

"The thing's empty," said Spargo.

"There might be a false bottom in it," remarked Rathbury. "One never knows. Here, jump into this!"

He pushed Spargo into a passing taxi-cab, and following, bade the driver go straight to the Yard. Arrived there, he locked Spargo and himself into the drab-visaged room in which the journalist had seen him before.

"What d'ye think of today's doings, Spargo?" he asked, as he proceeded to unlock a cupboard.

"I think," said Spargo, "that some of you fellows must have had your ears set to tingling."

"That's so," assented Rathbury. "Of course, the next thing'll be to find out all about the Mr. Aylmore of twenty years since. When a man won't tell you where he lived twenty years ago, what he was exactly doing, what his precise relationship with another man was—why, then, you've just got to find out, eh? Oh, some of our fellows are at work on the life history of Stephen Aylmore, Esq., M.P., already—you bet! Well, now, Spargo, here's the famous box."

The detective brought the old leather case out of the cupboard in which he had been searching, and placed it on his desk. Spargo threw back the lid and looked inside, measuring the inner capacity against the exterior lines.

"No false bottom in that, Rathbury," he said. "There's just the outer leather case, and the inner lining, of this old bed-hanging stuff, and that's all. There's no room for any false bottom or anything of that sort, d'you see?"

Rathbury also sized up the box's capacity.

"Looks like it," he said disappointedly. "Well, what about the lid, then? I remember there was an old box like this in my grandmother's farmhouse, where I was reared—there was a pocket in the lid. Let's see if there's anything of the sort here?"

He threw the lid back and began to poke about the lining of it with the tips of his fingers, and presently he turned to his companion with a sharp exclamation.

"By George, Spargo!" he said. "I don't know about any pocket, but there's something under this lining. Feels like—here, you feel. There—and there."

Spargo put a finger on the places indicated.

"Yes, that's so," he agreed. "Feels like two cards—a large and a small one. And the small one's harder than the other. Better cut that lining out, Rathbury."

"That," remarked Rathbury, producing a pen-knife, "is just what I'm going to do. We'll cut along this seam."

He ripped the lining carefully open along the upper part of the lining of the lid, and looking into the pocket thus made, drew out two objects which he dropped on his blotting pad.

"A child's photograph," he said, glancing at one of them. "But what on earth is that?"

The object to which he pointed was a small, oblong piece of thin, much-worn silver, about the size of a railway ticket. On one side of it was what seemed to be a heraldic device or coat-of-arms, almost obliterated by rubbing; on the other, similarly worn down by friction, was the figure of a horse.

"That's a curious object," remarked Spargo, picking it up. "I never saw anything like that before. What can it be?"

"Don't know—I never saw anything of the sort either," said Rathbury. "Some old token, I should say. Now this photo. Ah—you see, the photographer's name and address have been torn away or broken off—there's nothing left but just two letters of what's apparently been the name of the town—see. Er—that's all there is. Portrait of a baby, eh?"

Spargo gave, what might have been called in anybody else but him, a casual glance at the baby's portrait. He

picked up the silver ticket again and turned it over and over.

"Look here, Rathbury," he said. "Let me take this silver thing. I know where I can find out what it is. At least, I think I do."

"All right," agreed the detective, "but take the greatest care of it, and don't tell a soul that we found it in this box, you know. No connection with the Marbury case, Spargo, remember."

"Oh, all right," said Spargo. "Trust me."

He put the silver ticket in his pocket, and went back to the office, wondering about this singular find. And when he had written his article that evening, and seen a proof of it, Spargo went into Fleet Street intent on seeking peculiar information.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MARKET MILCASTER

The haunt of well-informed men which Spargo had in view when he turned out of the *Watchman* office lay well hidden from ordinary sight and knowledge in one of those Fleet Street courts the like of which is not elsewhere in the world. Only certain folk knew of it. It was, of course, a club; otherwise it would not have been what it was. It is the simplest thing in life, in England, at any rate, to form a club of congenial spirits. You get so many of your choice friends and acquaintances to gather round you; you register yourselves under a name of your own choosing; you take a house and furnish it according to your means and your taste: you comply with the very easy letter of the law, and there you are. Keep within that easy letter, and you can do what you please on your own premises. It is much more agreeable to have a small paradise of your own of this description than to lounge about Fleet Street bars.

The particular club to which Spargo bent his steps was called the Octoneumenoi. Who evolved this extraordinary combination of Latin and Greek was a dark mystery: there it was, however, on a tiny brass plate you once reached the portals. The portals were gained by devious ways. You turned out of Fleet Street by an alley so narrow that it seemed as if you might suddenly

find yourself squeezed between the ancient walls. Then you suddenly dived down another alley and found yourself in a small court, with high walls around you and a smell of printer's ink in your nose and a whirring of printing presses in your ears. You made another dive into a dark entry, much encumbered by bales of paper, crates of printing material, jars of printing ink; after falling over a few of these you struck an ancient flight of stairs and went up past various landings, always travelling in a state of gloom and fear. After a lot of twisting and turning you came to the very top of the house and found it heavily curtained off. You lifted a curtain and found yourself in a small entresol, somewhat artistically painted—the whole and sole work of an artistic member who came one day with a formidable array of lumber and paint-pots and worked his will on the ancient wood. Then you saw the brass plate and its fearful name, and beneath it the formal legal notice that this club was duly registered and so on, and if you were a member you went in, and if you weren't a member you tinkled an electric bell and asked to see a member—if you knew one.

Spargo was not a member, but he knew many members, and he tinkled the bell, and asked the boy who answered it for Mr. Starkey. Mr. Starkey, a young gentleman with the biceps of a prize-fighter and a head of curly hair that would have done credit to Antinous, came forth in due course and shook Spargo by the hand until his teeth rattled.

“Had we known you were coming,” said Mr. Starkey, “we'd have had a brass band on the stairs.”

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"I want to come in," remarked Spargo.

"Sure!" said Mr. Starkey. "That's what you've come for."

"Well, stand out of the way, then, and let's get in," said Spargo. "Look here," he continued when they had penetrated into a small vestibule, "doesn't old Crowfoot turn in here about this time every night?"

"Every night as true as the clock, my son Spargo, Crowfoot puts his nose in at precisely eleven, having by that time finished that daily column wherein he informs a section of the populace as to the prospects of their spotting a winner tomorrow," answered Mr. Starkey. "It's five minutes to his hour now. Come in and drink till he comes. Want him?"

"A word with him," answered Spargo. "A mere word—or two."

He followed Starkey into a room which was so filled with smoke and sound that for a moment it was impossible to either see or hear. But the smoke was gradually making itself into a canopy, and beneath the canopy Spargo made out various groups of men of all ages, sitting around small tables, smoking and drinking, and all talking as if the great object of their lives was to get as many words as possible out of their mouths in the shortest possible time. In the further corner was a small bar; Starkey pulled Spargo up to it.

"Name it, my son," commanded Starkey. "Try the Octoneumenoi very extra special. Two of 'em, Dick. Come to beg to be a member, Spargo?"

"I'll think about being a member of this ante-room of the infernal regions when you start a ventilating fan

and provide members with a route-map of the way from Fleet Street," answered Spargo, taking his glass. "Phew!—what an atmosphere!"

"We're considering a ventilating-fan," said Starkey. "I'm on the house committee now, and I brought that very matter up at our last meeting. But Templeson, of the *Bulletin*—you know Templeson—he says what we want is a wine-cooler to stand under that sideboard—says no club is proper without a wine-cooler, and that he knows a chap—second-hand dealer, don't you know—what has a beauty to dispose of in old Sheffield plate. Now, if you were on our house committee, Spargo, old man, would you go in for the wine-cooler or the ventilating fan? You see——"

"There is Crowfoot," said Spargo. "Shout him over here, Starkey, before anybody else collars him."

Through the door by which Spargo had entered a few minutes previously came a man who stood for a moment blinking at the smoke and the lights. He was a tall, elderly man with a figure and bearing of a soldier; a big, sweeping moustache stood well out against a square-cut jaw and beneath a prominent nose; a pair of keen blue eyes looked out from beneath a tousled mass of crinkled hair. He wore neither hat nor cap; his attire was a carelessly put on Norfolk suit of brown tweed; he looked half-unkempt, half-groomed. But knotted at the collar of his flannel shirt were the colours of one of the most famous and exclusive cricket clubs in the world, and everybody knew that in his day their wearer had been a mighty figure in the public eye.

"Hi, Crowfoot!" shouted Starkey above the din and

babel. "Crowfoot, Crowfoot! Come over here, there's a chap dying to see you!"

"Yes, that's the way to get him, isn't it?" said Spargo. "Here, I'll get him myself."

He went across the room and accosted the old sporting journalist.

"I want a quiet word with you," he said. "This place is like a pandemonium."

Crowfoot led the way into a side alcove and ordered a drink.

"Always is, this time," he said, yawning. "But it's companionable. What is it, Spargo?"

Spargo took a pull at the glass which he had carried with him. "I should say," he said, "that you know as much about sporting matters as any man writing about 'em?"

"Well, I think you might say it with truth," answered Crowfoot.

"And old sporting matters?" said Spargo.

"Yes, and old sporting matters," replied the other with a sudden flash of the eye. "Not that they greatly interest the modern generation, you know."

"Well, there's something that's interesting me greatly just now, anyway," said Spargo. "And I believe it's got to do with old sporting affairs. And I came to you for information about it, believing you to be the only man I know of that could tell anything."

"Yes—what is it?" asked Crowfoot.

Spargo drew out an envelope, and took from it the carefully-wrapped-up silver ticket. He took off the

wrappings and laid the ticket on Crowfoot's outstretched palm.

"Can you tell me what that is?" he asked.

Another sudden flash came into the old sportsman's eyes—he eagerly turned the silver ticket over.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get this?"

"Never mind, just now," replied Spargo. "You know what it is?"

"Certainly I know what it is! But—Gad! I've not seen one of these things for Lord knows how many years. It makes me feel something like a young 'un again!" said Crowfoot. "Quite a young 'un!"

"But what is it?" asked Spargo.

Crowfoot turned the ticket over, showing the side on which the heraldic device was almost worn away.

"It's one of the original silver stand tickets of the old racecourse at Market Milcaster," answered Crowfoot. "That's what it is. One of the old original silver stand tickets. There are the arms of Market Milcaster, you see, nearly worn away by much rubbing. There, on the obverse, is the figure of a running horse. Oh, yes, that's what it is! Bless me!—most interesting."

"Where's Market Milcaster?" enquired Spargo. "Don't know it."

"Market Milcaster," replied Crowfoot, still turning the silver ticket over and over, "is what the topographers call a decayed town in Elmshire. It has steadily decayed since the river that led to it got gradually silted up. There used to be a famous race-meeting there in

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June every year. It's nearly forty years since that meeting fell through. I went to it often when I was a lad—often!"

"And you say that's a ticket for the stand?" asked Spargo.

"This is one of fifty silver tickets, or passes, or whatever you like to call 'em, which were given by the race committee to fifty burgesses of the town," answered Crowfoot. "It was, I remember, considered a great privilege to possess a silver ticket. It admitted its possessor—for life, mind you!—to the stand, the paddocks, the ring, anywhere. It also gave him a place at the annual race-dinner. Where on earth did you get this, Spargo?"

Spargo took the ticket and carefully re-wrapped it, this time putting it in his purse.

"I'm awfully obliged to you, Crowfoot," he said. "The fact is, I can't tell you where I got it just now, but I'll promise you that I will tell you, and all about it, too, as soon as my tongue's free to do so."

"Some mystery, eh?" suggested Crowfoot.

"Considerable," answered Spargo. "Don't mention to anyone that I showed it to you. You shall know everything eventually."

"Oh, all right, my boy, all right!" said Crowfoot. "Odd how things turn up, isn't it? Now, I'll wager anything that there aren't half a dozen of these old things outside Market Milcaster itself. As I said, there were only fifty, and they were all in possession of burgesses. They were so much thought of that they were taken great care of. I've been in Market Milcaster

myself since the races were given up, and I've seen these tickets carefully framed and hung over mantelpieces—oh, yes!”

Spargo caught at a notion.

“How do you get to Market Milcaster?” he asked.

“Paddington,” replied Crowfoot. “It’s a goodish way.”

“I wonder,” said Spargo, “if there’s any old sporting man there who could remember—things. Anything about this ticket, for instance?”

“Old sporting man!” exclaimed Crowfoot. “Egad!—but no, he must be dead—anyhow, if he isn’t dead, he must be a veritable patriarch. Old Ben Quarterpage, he was an auctioneer in the town, and a rare sportsman.”

“I may go down there,” said Spargo. “I’ll see if he’s alive.”

“Then, if you do go down,” suggested Crowfoot, “go to the old ‘Yellow Dragon’ in the High Street, a fine old place. Quarterpage’s place of business and his private house were exactly opposite the ‘Dragon.’ But I’m afraid you’ll find him dead—it’s five and twenty years since I was in Market Milcaster, and he was an old bird then. Let’s see, now. If Old Ben Quarterpage is alive, Spargo, he’ll be ninety years of age!”

“Well, I’ve known men of ninety who were spry enough, even in my bit of experience,” said Spargo. “I know one—now—my own grandfather. Well, the best of thanks, Crowfoot, and I’ll tell you all about it some day.”

“Have another drink?” suggested Crowfoot.

But Spargo excused himself. He was going back to

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the office, he said; he still had something to do. And he got himself away from the Octoneuменoi, in spite of Starkey, who wished to start a general debate on the wisest way of expending the club's ready money balance, and went back to the *Watchman*, and there he sought the presence of the editor, and in spite of the fact that it was the busiest hour of the night, saw him and remained closeted with him for the extraordinary space of ten minutes. And after that Spargo went home and fell into bed.

But next morning, bright and early, he was on the departure platform at Paddington, suit-case in hand, and ticket in pocket for Market Milcester, and in the course of that afternoon he found himself in an old-fashioned bedroom looking out on Market Milcester High Street. And there, right opposite him, he saw an ancient house, old brick, ivy-covered, with an office at its side, over the door of which was the name, *Benjamin Quarterpage*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE "YELLOW DRAGON"

Spargo, changing his clothes, washing away the dust of his journey, in that old-fashioned lavender-scented bedroom, busied his mind in further speculations on his plan of campaign in Market Milcaster. He had no particularly clear plan. The one thing he was certain of was that in the old leather box which the man whom he knew as John Marbury had deposited with the London and Universal Safe Deposit Company, he and Rathbury had discovered one of the old silver tickets of Market Milcaster racecourse, and that he, Spargo, had come to Market Milcaster, with the full approval of his editor, in an endeavour to trace it. How was he going to set about this difficult task?

"The first thing," said Spargo to himself as he tied a new tie, "is to have a look round. That'll be no long job."

For he had already seen as he approached the town, and as he drove from the station to the "Yellow Dragon" Hotel, that Market Milcaster was a very small place. It chiefly consisted of one long, wide thoroughfare—the High Street—with smaller streets leading from it on either side. In the High Street seemed to be everything that the town could show—the ancient parish

church, the town hall, the market cross, the principal houses and shops, the bridge, beneath which ran the river whereon ships had once come up to the town before its mouth, four miles away, became impassably silted up. It was a bright, clean, little town, but there were few signs of trade in it, and Spargo had been quick to notice that in the "Yellow Dragon," a big, rambling old hostelry, reminiscent of the old coaching days, there seemed to be little doing. He had eaten a bit of lunch in the coffee-room immediately on his arrival; the coffee-room was big enough to accommodate a hundred and fifty people, but beyond himself, an old gentleman and his daughter, evidently tourists, two young men talking golf, a man who looked like an artist, and an unmistakable honeymooning couple, there was no one in it. There was little traffic in the wide street beneath Spargo's windows; little passage of people to and fro on the sidewalks; here a countryman drove a lazy cow as lazily along; there a farmer in his light cart sat idly chatting with an aproned tradesman, who had come out of his shop to talk to him. Over everything lay the quiet of the sunlight of the summer afternoon, and through the open windows stole a faint, sweet scent of the new-mown hay lying in the meadows outside the old houses.

"A veritable Sleepy Hollow," mused Spargo. "Let's go down and see if there's anybody to talk to. Great Scott!—to think that I was in the poisonous atmosphere of the Octoneumenoi only sixteen hours ago!"

Spargo, after losing himself in various corridors and passages, finally landed in the wide, stone-paved hall of the old hotel, and with a sure instinct turned into the

bar-parlour which he had noticed when he entered the place. This was a roomy, comfortable, bow-windowed apartment, looking out upon the High Street, and was furnished and ornamented with the usual appurtenances of country-town hotels. There were old chairs and tables and sideboards and cupboards, which had certainly been made a century before, and seemed likely to endure for a century or two longer; there were old prints of the road and the chase, and an old oil-painting or two of red-faced gentlemen in pink coats; there were foxes' masks on the wall, and a monster pike in a glass case on a side-table; there were ancient candlesticks on the mantelpiece and an antique snuff-box set between them. Also there was a small, old-fashioned bar in a corner of the room, and a new-fashioned young woman seated behind it, who was yawning over a piece of fancy needlework, and looked at Spargo when he entered as Andromeda may have looked at Perseus when he made arrival at her rock. And Spargo, treating himself to a suitable drink and choosing a cigar to accompany it, noted the look, and dropped into the nearest chair.

"This," he remarked, eyeing the damsel with enquiry, "appears to me to be a very quiet place."

"Quiet!" exclaimed the lady. "Quiet?"

"That," continued Spargo, "is precisely what I observed. Quiet. I see that you agree with me. You expressed your agreement with two shades of emphasis, the surprised and the scornful. We may conclude, thus far, that the place is undoubtedly quiet."

The damsel looked at Spargo as if she considered him in the light of a new specimen, and picking up her

needlework she quitted the bar and coming out into the room took a chair near his own.

"It makes you thankful to see a funeral go by here," she remarked. "It's about all that one ever does see."

"Are there many?" asked Spargo. "Do the inhabitants die much of inanition?"

The damsel gave Spargo another critical inspection.

"Oh, you're joking!" she said. "It's well you can. Nothing ever happens here. This place is a back number."

"Even the back numbers make pleasant reading at times," murmured Spargo. "And the backwaters of life are refreshing. Nothing doing in this town, then?" he added in a louder voice.

"Nothing!" replied his companion. "It's fast asleep. I came here from Birmingham, and I didn't know what I was coming to. In Birmingham you see as many people in ten minutes as you see here in ten months."

"Ah!" said Spargo. "What you are suffering from is dulness. You must have an antidote."

"Dulness!" exclaimed the damsel. "That's the right word for Market Milcaster. There's just a few regular old customers drop in here of a morning, between eleven and one. A stray caller looks in—perhaps—during the afternoon. Then, at night, a lot of old fogies sit round that end of the room and talk about old times. Old times, indeed!—what they want in Market Milcaster is new times."

Spargo pricked up his ears.

"Well, but it's rather interesting to hear old fogies talk about old times," he said. "I love it!"

"Then you can get as much of it as ever you want here," remarked the barmaid. "Look in tonight any time after eight o'clock, and if you don't know more about the history of Market Milcaster by ten than you did when you sat down, you must be deaf. There are some old gentlemen drop in here every night, regular as clockwork, who seem to feel that they couldn't go to bed unless they've told each other stories about old days which I should think they've heard a thousand times already!"

"Very old men?" asked Spargo.

"Methuselahs," replied the lady. "There's old Mr. Quarterpage, across the way there, the auctioneer, though he doesn't do any business now—they say he's ninety, though I'm sure you wouldn't take him for more than seventy. And there's Mr. Lummis, further down the street—he's eighty-one. And Mr. Skene, and Mr. Kaye—they're regular patriarchs. I've sat here and listened to them till I believe I could write a history of Market Milcaster since the year One."

"I can conceive of that as a pleasant and profitable occupation," said Spargo.

He chatted a while longer in a fashion calculated to cheer the barmaid's spirits, after which he went out and strolled around the town until seven o'clock, the "Dragon's" hour for dinner. There were no more people in the big coffee-room than there had been at lunch and Spargo was glad, when his solitary meal was over, to escape to the bar-parlour, where he took his coffee in a corner near to that sacred part in which the old townsmen had been reported to him to sit.

"And mind you don't sit in one of their chairs," said the barmaid, warningly. "They all have their own special chairs and their special pipes there on that rack, and I suppose the ceiling would fall in if anybody touched pipe or chair. But you're all right there, and you'll hear all they've got to say."

To Spargo, who had never seen anything of the sort before, and who, twenty-four hours previously, would have believed the thing impossible, the proceedings of that evening in the bar-parlour of the "Yellow Dragon" at Market Milcaster were like a sudden transference to the eighteenth century. Precisely as the clock struck eight and a bell began to toll somewhere in the recesses of the High Street, an old gentleman walked in, and the barmaid, catching Spargo's eye, gave him a glance which showed that the play was about to begin.

"Good evening, Mr. Kaye," said the barmaid. "You're first tonight."

"Evening," said Mr. Kaye and took a seat, scowled around him, and became silent. He was a tall, lank old gentleman, clad in rusty black clothes, with a pointed collar sticking up on both sides of his fringe of grey whisker and a voluminous black neckcloth folded several times round his neck, and by the expression of his countenance was inclined to look on life severely. "Nobody been in yet?" asked Mr. Kaye.

"No, but here's Mr. Lummis and Mr. Skene," replied the barmaid.

Two more old gentlemen entered the bar-parlour. Of these, one was a little, dapper-figured man, clad in clothes of an eminently sporting cut, and of very loud

pattern; he sported a bright blue necktie, a flower in his lapel, and a tall white hat, which he wore at a rakish angle. The other was a big, portly, bearded man with a Falstaffian swagger and a rakish eye, who chaffed the barmaid as he entered, and gave her a good-humoured chuck under the chin as he passed her. These two also sank into chairs which seemed to have been specially designed to meet them, and the stout man slapped the arms of his as familiarly as he had greeted the barmaid. He looked at his two cronies.

"Well?" he said. "Here's three of us. And there's a symposium."

"Wait a bit, wait a bit," said the dapper little man. "Grandpa'll be here in a minute. We'll start fair."

The barmaid glanced out of the window.

"There's Mr. Quarterpage coming across the street now," she announced. "Shall I put the things on the table?"

"Aye, put them on, my dear, put them on!" commanded the fat man. "Have all in readiness."

The barmaid thereupon placed a round table before the sacred chairs, set out upon it a fine old punch-bowl and the various ingredients for making punch, a box of cigars, and an old leaden tobacco-box, and she had just completed this interesting prelude to the evening's discourse when the door opened again and in walked one of the most remarkable old men Spargo had ever seen. And by this time, knowing that this was the venerable Mr. Benjamin Quarterpage, of whom Crowfoot had told him, he took good stock of the newcomer as he took his place amongst his friends, who on their part received

him with ebullitions of delight which were positively boyish.

Mr. Quarterpage was a youthful buck of ninety—a middle-sized, sturdily-built man, straight as a dart, still active of limb, clear-eyed, and strong of voice. His clean-shaven old countenance was ruddy as a sun-warmed pippin; his hair was still only silvered; his hand was steady as a rock. His clothes of buff-coloured whipcord were smart and jaunty, his neckerchief as gay as if he had been going to a fair. It seemed to Spargo that Mr. Quarterpage had a pretty long lease of life before him even at his age.

Spargo, in his corner, sat fascinated while the old gentlemen began their symposium. Another, making five, came in and joined them—the five had the end of the bar-parlour to themselves. Mr. Quarterpage made the punch with all due solemnity and ceremony; when it was ladled out each man lighted his pipe or took a cigar, and the tongues began to wag. Other folk came and went; the old gentlemen were oblivious of anything but their own talk. Now and then a young gentleman of the town dropped in to take his modest half-pint of bitter beer and to dally in the presence of the barmaid; such looked with awe at the patriarchs: as for the patriarchs themselves they were lost in the past.

Spargo began to understand what the damsel behind the bar meant when she said that she believed she could write a history of Market Milcaster since the year One. After discussing the weather, the local events of the day, and various personal matters, the old fellows got to reminiscences of the past, telling tale after tale, recalling

incident upon incident of long years before. At last they turned to memories of racing days at Market Milcaster. And at that Spargo determined on a bold stroke. Now was the time to get some information. Taking the silver ticket from his purse, he laid it, the heraldic device uppermost, on the palm of his hand, and approaching the group with a polite bow, said quietly:

"Gentlemen, can any of you tell me anything about that?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MR. QUARTERPAGE HARKS BACK

If Spargo had upset the old gentlemen's bowl of punch—the second of the evening—or had dropped an infernal machine in their midst, he could scarcely have produced a more startling effect than that wrought upon them by his sudden production of the silver ticket. Their babble of conversation died out; one of them dropped his pipe; another took his cigar out of his mouth as if he had suddenly discovered that he was sucking a stick of poison; all lifted astonished faces to the interrupter, staring from him to the shining object exhibited in his outstretched palm, from it back to him. And at last Mr. Quarterpage, to whom Spargo had more particularly addressed himself, spoke, pointing with great *empressement* to the ticket.

"Young gentleman!" he said, in accents that seemed to Spargo to tremble a little, "young gentleman, where did you get that?"

"You know what it is, then?" asked Spargo, willing to dally a little with the matter. "You recognize it?"

"Know it! Recognize it!" exclaimed Mr. Quarterpage. "Yes, and so does every gentleman present. And it is just because I see you are a stranger to this town

that I ask you where you got it. Not, I think, young gentleman, in this town."

"No," replied Spargo. "Certainly not in this town. How should I get it in this town if I'm a stranger?"

"Quite true, quite true!" murmured Mr. Quarterpage. "I cannot conceive how any person in the town who is in possession of one of those—what shall we call them—heirlooms?—yes, heirlooms of antiquity, could possibly be base enough to part with it. Therefore, I ask again—Where did you get that, young gentleman?"

"Before I tell you that," answered Spargo, who, in answer to a silent sign from the fat man had drawn a chair amongst them, "perhaps you will tell me exactly what this is? I see it to be a bit of old, polished, much worn silver, having on the obverse the arms or heraldic bearings of somebody or something; on the reverse the figure of a running horse. But—what is it?"

The five old men all glanced at each other and made simultaneous grunts. Then Mr. Quarterpage spoke.

"It is one of the original fifty burgess tickets of Market Milcaster, young sir, which gave its holder special and greatly valued privileges in respect to attendance at our once famous race-meeting, now unfortunately a thing of the past," he added. "Fifty—aye, forty!—years ago, to be in possession of one of those tickets was—was——"

"A grand thing!" said one of the old gentlemen.

"Mr. Lummis is right," said Mr. Quarterpage. "It was a grand thing—a very grand thing. Those tickets, sir, were treasured—are treasured. And yet you, a stranger, show us one! You got it, sir——"

Spargo saw that it was now necessary to cut matters short.

"I found this ticket—under mysterious circumstances—in London," he answered. "I want to trace it. I want to know who its original owner was. That is why I have come to Market Milcaster."

Mr. Quarterpage slowly looked round the circle of faces.

"Wonderful!" he said. "Wonderful! He found this ticket—one of our famous fifty—in London, and under mysterious circumstances. He wants to trace it—he wants to know to whom it belonged! That is why he has come to Market Milcaster. Most extraordinary! Gentlemen, I appeal to you if this is not the most extraordinary event that has happened in Market Milcaster for—I don't know how many years?"

There was a general murmur of assent, and Spargo found everybody looking at him as if he had just announced that he had come to buy the whole town.

"But—why?" he asked, showing great surprise. "Why?"

"Why?" exclaimed Mr. Quarterpage. "Why? He asks—why? Because, young gentleman, it is the greatest surprise to me, and to these friends of mine, too, every man jack of 'em, to hear that any one of our fifty tickets ever passed out of the possession of any of the fifty families to whom they belonged! And unless I am vastly, greatly, most unexplainably mistaken, young sir, you are not a member of any Market Milcaster family."

"No, I'm not," admitted Spargo. And he was going

to add that until the previous evening he had never even heard of Market Milcaster, but he wisely refrained. "No, I'm certainly not," he added.

Mr. Quarterpage waved his long pipe.

"I believe," he said, "I believe that if the evening were not drawing to a close—it is already within a few minutes of our departure, young gentleman—I believe, I say, that if I had time, I could, from memory, give the names of the fifty families who held those tickets when the race-meeting came to an end. I believe I could!"

"I'm sure you could!" asserted the little man in the loud suit. "Never was such a memory as yours, never!"

"Especially for anything relating to the old racing matters," said the fat man. "Mr. Quarterpage is a walking encyclopædia."

"My memory is good," said Mr. Quarterpage. "It's the greatest blessing I have in my declining years. Yes, I am sure I could do that, with a little thought. And what's more, nearly every one of those fifty families is still in the town, or if not in the town, close by it, or if not close by it, I know where they are. Therefore, I cannot make out how this young gentleman—from London, did you say, sir?"

"From London," answered Spargo.

"This young gentleman from London comes to be in possession of one of our tickets," continued Mr. Quarterpage. "It is—wonderful! But I tell you what, young gentleman from London, if you will do me the honour to breakfast with me in the morning, sir, I will

show you my racing books and papers and we will speedily discover who the original holder of that ticket was. My name, sir, is Quarterpage—Benjamin Quarterpage—and I reside at the ivy-covered house exactly opposite this inn, and my breakfast hour is nine o'clock sharp, and I shall bid you heartily welcome!"

Spargo made his best bow.

"Sir," he said, "I am greatly obliged by your kind invitation, and I shall consider it an honour to wait upon you to the moment."

Accordingly, at five minutes to nine next morning, Spargo found himself in an old-fashioned parlour, looking out upon a delightful garden, gay with summer flowers, and being introduced by Mr. Quarterpage, Senior, to Mr. Quarterpage, Junior—a pleasant gentleman of sixty, always referred to by his father as something quite juvenile—and to Miss Quarterpage, a young-old lady of something a little less elderly than her brother, and to a breakfast table bounteously spread with all the choice fare of the season. Mr. Quarterpage, Senior, was as fresh and rosy as a cherub; it was a revelation to Spargo to encounter so old a man who was still in possession of such life and spirits, and of such a vigorous and healthy appetite.

Naturally, the talk over the breakfast table ran on Spargo's possession of the old silver ticket, upon which subject it was evident Mr. Quarterpage was still exercising his intellect. And Spargo, who had judged it well to enlighten his host as to who he was, and had exhibited a letter with which the editor of the *Watchman* had furnished him, told how in the exercise of his journalistic

duties he had discovered the ticket in the lining of an old box. But he made no mention of the Marbury matter, being anxious to see first whither Mr. Quarterpage's revelations would lead him.

"You have no idea, Mr. Spargo," said the old gentleman, when, breakfast over, he and Spargo were closeted together in a little library in which were abundant evidences of the host's taste in sporting matters; "you have no idea of the value which was attached to the possession of one of those silver tickets. There is mine, as you see, securely framed and just as securely fastened to the wall. Those fifty silver tickets, my dear sir, were made when our old race-meeting was initiated, in the year 1781. They were made in the town by a local silversmith, whose great-great-grandson still carries on the business. The fifty were distributed amongst the fifty leading burgesses of the town to be kept in their families for ever—nobody ever anticipated in those days that our race-meeting would ever be discontinued. The ticket carried great privileges. It made its holder, and all members of his family, male and female, free of the stands, rings, and paddocks. It gave the holder himself and his eldest son, if of age, the right to a seat at our grand race banquet—at which, I may tell you, Mr. Spargo, Royalty itself has been present in the good old days. Consequently, as you see, to be the holder of a silver ticket was to be somebody."

"And when the race-meeting fell through?" asked Spargo. "What then?"

"Then, of course, the families who held the tickets looked upon them as heirlooms, to be taken great care

of," replied Mr. Quarterpage. "They were dealt with as I dealt with mine—framed on velvet, and hung up—or locked away: I am sure that anybody who had one took the greatest care of it. Now, I said last night, over there at the 'Dragon,' that I could repeat the names of all the families who held these tickets. So I can. But here"—the old gentleman drew out a drawer and produced from it a parchment-bound book which he handled with great reverence—"here is a little volume of my own handwriting—memoranda relating to Market Milcaster Races—in which is a list of the original holders, together with another list showing who held the tickets when the races were given up. I make bold to say, Mr. Spargo, that by going through the second list, I could trace every ticket—except the one you have in your purse."

"Every one?" said Spargo, in some surprise.

"Every one! For as I told you," continued Mr. Quarterpage, "the families are either in the town (we're a conservative people here in Market Milcaster and we don't move far afield) or they're just outside the town, or they're not far away. I can't conceive how the ticket you have—and it's genuine enough—could ever get out of possession of one of these families, and——"

"Perhaps," suggested Spargo, "it never has been out of possession. I told you it was found in the lining of a box—that box belonged to a dead man."

"A dead man!" exclaimed Mr. Quarterpage. "A dead man! Who could—ah! Perhaps—perhaps I have an idea. Yes!—an idea. I remember something now that I had never thought of."

The old gentleman unfastened the clasp of his parchment-bound book, and turned over its pages until he came to one whereon was a list of names. He pointed this out to Spargo.

"There is the list of holders of the silver tickets at the time the race-meetings came to an end," he said. "If you were acquainted with this town you would know that those are the names of our best-known inhabitants—all, of course, burgesses. There's mine, you see—Quarterpage. There's Lummis, there's Kaye, there's Skene, there's Templeby—the gentlemen you saw last night. All good old town names. They all are—on this list. I know every family mentioned. The holders of that time are many of them dead; but their successors have the tickets. Yes—and now that I think of it, there's only one man who held a ticket when this list was made about whom I don't know anything—at least, anything recent. The ticket, Mr. Spargo, which you've found must have been his. But I thought—I thought somebody else had it!"

"And this man, sir? Who was he?" asked Spargo, intuitively conscious that he was coming to news. "Is his name there?"

The old man ran the tip of his finger down the list of names.

"There it is!" he said. "John Maitland."

Spargo bent over the fine writing.

"Yes, John Maitland," he observed. "And who was John Maitland?"

Mr. Quarterpage shook his head. He turned to another of the many drawers in an ancient bureau, and

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began to search amongst a mass of old newspapers, carefully sorted into small bundles and tied up.

“If you had lived in Market Milcaster one-and-twenty years ago, Mr. Spargo,” he said, “you would have known who John Maitland was. For some time, sir, he was the best-known man in the place—aye, and in this corner of the world. But—aye, here it is—the newspaper of October 5th, 1891. Now, Mr. Spargo, you’ll find in this old newspaper who John Maitland was, and all about him. Now, I’ll tell you what to do. I’ve just got to go into my office for an hour to talk the day’s business over with my son—you take this newspaper out into the garden there with one of these cigars, and read what’ll you find in it, and when you’ve read that we’ll have some more talk.”

Spargo carried the old newspaper into the sunlit garden.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AN OLD NEWSPAPER

As soon as Spargo unfolded the paper he saw what he wanted on the middle page, headed in two lines of big capitals. He lighted a cigar and settled down to read.

“MARKET MILCASTER QUARTER SESSIONS

“TRIAL OF JOHN MAITLAND

“The Quarter Sessions for the Borough of Market Milcaster were held on Wednesday last, October 3rd, 1891, in the Town Hall, before the Recorder, Henry John Campernowne, Esq., K.C., who was accompanied on the bench by the Worshipful the Mayor of Market Milcaster (Alderman Pettiford), the Vicar of Market Milcaster (the Rev. P. B. Clabberton, M.A., R.D.), Alderman Danks, J.P., Alderman Peters, J.P., Sir Gervais Racton, J.P., Colonel Fludgate, J. P., Captain Murrill, J.P., and other magistrates and gentlemen. There was a crowded attendance of the public in anticipation of the trial of John Maitland, ex-manager of the Market Milcaster Bank, and the reserved portions of the Court were filled with the *élite* of the town and neighbourhood, including a considerable number of ladies who manifested the greatest interest in the proceedings.

“The Recorder, in charging the Grand Jury, said he regretted that the very pleasant and gratifying experience which had been his upon the occasion of his last two official visits to Market Milcaster—he referred to the fact that on both those occasions his friend the Worshipful Mayor had been able to present him with a pair of white gloves—was not to be repeated on the present occasion. It would be their sad and regrettable lot to have before them a fellow-townsmen whose family had for generations occupied a foremost position in the life of the borough. That fellow-townsmen was charged with one of the most serious offences known to a commercial nation like ours: the offence of embezzling the moneys of the bank of which he had for many years been the trusted manager, and with which he had been connected all his life since his school days. He understood that the prisoner who would shortly be put before the court on his trial was about to plead guilty, and there would accordingly be no need for him to direct the gentlemen of the Grand Jury on this matter—what he had to say respecting the gravity and even enormity of the offence he would reserve. The Recorder then addressed himself to the Grand Jury on the merits of two minor cases, which came before the court at a later period of the morning, after which they retired, and having formally returned a true bill against the prisoner, and a petty jury, chosen from well-known burgesses of the town having been duly sworn,

“JOHN MAITLAND, aged 42, bank manager, of the Bank House, High Street, Market Milcaster, was for-

inally charged with embezzling, on April 23rd, 1891, the sum of £4,875 10s. 6d., the moneys of his employers, the Market Milcaster Banking Company Ltd., and converting the same to his own use. The prisoner, who appeared to feel his position most acutely, and who looked very pale and much worn, was represented by Mr. Charles Doolittle, the well-known barrister of Kingshaven; Mr. Stephens, K.C., appeared on behalf of the prosecution.

“Maitland, upon being charged, pleaded guilty.

“Mr. Stephens, K.C., addressing the Recorder, said that without any desire to unduly press upon the prisoner, who, he ventured to think, had taken a very wise course in pleading guilty to that particular count in the indictment with which he stood charged, he felt bound, in the interests of justice, to set forth to the Court some particulars of the defalcations which had arisen through the prisoner’s much lamented dishonesty. He proposed to offer a clear and succinct account of the matter. The prisoner, John Maitland, was the last of an old Market Milcaster family—he was, in fact, he believed, with the exception of his own infant son, the very last of the race. His father had been manager of the bank before him. Maitland himself had entered the service of the bank at the age of eighteen, when he left the local Grammar School; he succeeded his father as manager at the age of thirty-two; he had therefore occupied this highest position of trust for ten years. His directors had the fullest confidence in him; they relied on his honesty and his honour; they gave him discretionary powers

such as no bank-manager, probably, ever enjoyed or held before. In fact, he was so trusted that he was, to all intents and purposes, the Market Milcaster Banking Company; in other words he was allowed full control over everything, and given full licence to do what he liked. Whether the directors were wise in extending such liberty to even the most trusted servant, it was not for him (Mr. Stephens) to say; it was some consolation, under the circumstances, to know that the loss would fall upon the directors, inasmuch as they themselves held nearly the whole of the shares. But he had to speak of the loss—of the serious defalcations which Maitland had committed. The prisoner had wisely pleaded guilty to the first count of the indictment. But there were no less than seventeen counts in the indictment. He had pleaded guilty to embezzling a sum of £4,875 odd. But the total amount of the defalcations, comprised in the seventeen counts, was no less—it seemed a most amazing sum!—than £221,573 8s. 6*d.*! There was the fact—the banking company had been robbed of over two hundred thousand pounds by the prisoner in the dock before a mere accident, the most trifling chance, had revealed to the astounded directors that he was robbing them at all. And the most serious feature of the whole case was that not one penny of this money had been, or ever could be, recovered. He believed that the prisoner's learned counsel was about to urge upon the Court that the prisoner himself had been tricked and deceived by another man, unfortunately not before the Court—a man, he understood, also well known in Market Mil-

easter, who was now dead, and therefore could not be called, but whether he was so tricked or deceived was no excuse for his clever and wholesale robbing of his employers. He had thought it necessary to put these facts—which would not be denied—before the Court, in order that it might be known how heavy the defalcations really had been, and that they should be considered in dealing with the prisoner.

“The Recorder asked if there was no possibility of recovering any part of the vast sum concerned.

“Mr. Stephens replied that they were informed that there was not the remotest chance—the money, it was said by prisoner and those acting on his behalf, had utterly vanished with the death of the man to whom he had just made reference.

“Mr. Doolittle, on behalf of the prisoner, craved to address a few words to the Court in mitigation of sentence. He thanked Mr. Stephens for the considerate and eminently dispassionate manner in which he had outlined the main facts of the case. He had no desire to minimize the prisoner’s guilt. But, on prisoner’s behalf, he desired to tell the true story as to how these things came to be. Until as recently as three years previously the prisoner had never made the slightest deviation from the straight path of integrity. Unfortunately for him, and, he believed, for some others in Market Milcaster, there came to the town three years before the present proceedings, a man named Chamberlayne, who commenced business in the High Street as a stock-and-share broker. A man of good address and the most

plausible manners, Chamberlayne attracted a good many people—amongst them his unfortunate client. It was matter of common knowledge that Chamberlayne had induced numerous persons in Market Milcaster to enter into financial transactions with him; it was matter of common repute that those transactions had not always turned out well for Chamberlayne's clients. Unhappily for himself, Maitland had great faith in Chamberlayne. He had begun to have transactions with him in a large way; they had gone on and on in a large way until he was involved to vast amounts. Believing thoroughly in Chamberlayne and his methods, he had entrusted him with very large sums of money.

“The Recorder interrupted Mr. Doolittle at this point to ask if he was to understand that Mr. Doolittle was referring to the prisoner's own money.

“Mr. Doolittle replied that he was afraid the large sums he referred to were the property of the bank. But the prisoner had such belief in Chamberlayne that he firmly anticipated that all would be well, and that these sums would be repaid, and that a vast profit would result from their use.

“The Recorder remarked that he supposed the prisoner intended to put the profit into his own pockets.

“Mr. Doolittle said at any rate the prisoner assured him that of the two hundred and twenty thousand pounds which was in question, Chamberlayne had had the immediate handling of at least two hundred thousand, and he, the prisoner, had not the ghost of a notion as to what Chamberlayne had done with it.

Unfortunately for everybody, for the bank, for some other people, and especially for his unhappy client, Chamberlayne died, very suddenly, just as these proceedings were instituted, and so far it had been absolutely impossible to trace anything of the moneys concerned. He had died under mysterious circumstances, and there was just as much mystery about his affairs.

“The Recorder observed that he was still waiting to hear what Mr. Doolittle had to urge in mitigation of any sentence he, the Recorder, might think fit to pass.

“Mr. Doolittle said that he would trouble the Court with as few remarks as possible. All that he could urge on behalf of the unfortunate man in the dock was that until three years ago he had borne a most exemplary character, and had never committed a dishonest action. It had been his misfortune, his folly, to allow a plausible man to persuade him to these acts of dishonesty. That man had been called to another account, and the prisoner was left to bear the consequences of his association with him. It seemed as if Chamberlayne had made away with the money for his own purposes, and it might be that it would yet be recovered. He would only ask the Court to remember the prisoner’s antecedents and his previous good conduct, and to bear in mind that whatever his near future might be he was, in a commercial sense, ruined for life.

“The Recorder, in passing sentence, said that he had not heard a single word of valid excuse for Mait-

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land's conduct. Such dishonesty must be punished in the most severe fashion, and the prisoner must go to penal servitude for ten years.

“Maitland, who heard the sentence unmoved, was removed from the town later in the day to the county jail at Saxchester.”

Spargo read all this swiftly; then went over it again, noting certain points in it. At last he folded up the newspaper and turned to the house—to see old Quarterpage beckoning to him from the library window.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CHAMBERLAYNE STORY

"I perceive, sir," said Mr. Quarterpage, as Spargo entered the library, "that you have read the account of the Maitland trial."

"Twice," replied Spargo.

"And you have come to the conclusion that—but what conclusion have you come to?" asked Mr. Quarterpage.

"That the silver ticket in my purse was Maitland's property," said Spargo, who was not going to give all his conclusions at once.

"Just so," agreed the old gentleman. "I think so—I can't think anything else. But I was under the impression that I could have accounted for that ticket, just as I am sure I can account for the other forty-nine."

"Yes—and how?" asked Spargo.

Mr. Quarterpage turned to a corner cupboard and in silence produced a decanter and two curiously-shaped old wine-glasses. He carefully polished the glasses with a cloth which he took from a drawer, and set glasses and decanter on a table in the window, motioning Spargo to take a chair in proximity thereto. He himself pulled up his own elbow-chair.

"We'll take a glass of my old brown sherry," he said.

"Though I say it as shouldn't, as the saying goes, I don't think you could find better brown sherry than that from Land's End to Berwick-upon-Tweed, Mr. Spargo—no, nor further north either, where they used to have good taste in liquor in my young days! Well, here's your good health, sir, and I'll tell you about Maitland."

"I'm curious," said Spargo. "And about more than Maitland. I want to know about a lot of things arising out of that newspaper report. I want to know something about the man referred to so much—the stockbroker, Chamberlayne."

"Just so," observed Mr. Quarterpage, smiling. "I thought that would touch your sense of the inquisitive. But Maitland first. Now, when Maitland went to prison, he left behind him a child, a boy, just then about two years old. The child's mother was dead. Her sister, a Miss Baylis, appeared on the scene—Maitland had married his wife from a distance—and took possession of the child and of Maitland's personal effects. He had been made bankrupt while he was awaiting his trial, and all his household goods were sold. But this Miss Baylis took some small personal things, and I always believed that she took the silver ticket. And she may have done, for anything I know to the contrary. Anyway, she took the child away, and there was an end of the Maitland family in Market Milcaster. Maitland, of course, was in due procedure of things removed to Dartmoor, and there he served his term. There were people who were very anxious to get hold of him when he came out—the bank people, for they believed that he knew more about the disposition of that money than he'd ever told, and

they wanted to induce him to tell what they hoped he knew—between ourselves, Mr. Spargo, they were going to make it worth his while to tell.”

Spargo tapped the newspaper, which he had retained while the old gentleman talked.

“Then they didn’t believe what his counsel said—that Chamberlayne got all the money?” he asked.

Mr. Quarterpage laughed.

“No—nor anybody else!” he answered. “There was a strong idea in the town—you’ll see why afterwards—that it was all a put-up job, and that Maitland cheerfully underwent his punishment knowing that there was a nice fortune waiting for him when he came out. And as I say, the bank people meant to get hold of him. But though they sent a special agent to meet him on his release, they never did get hold of him. Some mistake arose—when Maitland was released, he got clear away. Nobody’s ever heard a word of him from that day to this. Unless Miss Baylis has.”

“Where does this Miss Baylis live?” asked Spargo.

“Well, I don’t know,” replied Mr. Quarterpage. “She did live in Brighton when she took the child away, and her address was known, and I have it somewhere. But when the bank people sought her out after Maitland’s release, she, too, had clean disappeared, and all efforts to trace her failed. In fact, according to the folks who lived near her in Brighton, she’d completely disappeared, with the child, five years before. So there wasn’t a clue to Maitland. He served his time—made a model prisoner—they did find that much out!—earned the maximum remission, was released, and vanished.”

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And for that very reason there's a theory about him in this very town to this very day!"

"What?" asked Spargo.

"This. That he's now living comfortably, luxuriously abroad on what he got from the bank," replied Mr. Quarterpage. "They say that the sister-in-law was in at the game; that when she disappeared with the child, she went abroad somewhere and made a home ready for Maitland, and that he went off to them as soon as he came out. Do you see?"

"I suppose that was possible," said Spargo.

"Quite possible, sir. But now," continued the old gentleman, replenishing the glasses, "now we come on to the Chamberlayne story. It's a good deal more to do with the Maitland story than appears at first sight. I'll tell it to you and you can form your own conclusions. Chamberlayne was a man who came to Market Milcaster—I don't know from where—in 1886—five years before the Maitland smash-up. He was then about Maitland's age—a man of thirty-seven or eight. He came as clerk to old Mr. Vallas, the rope and twine manufacturer: Vallas's place is still there, at the bottom of the High Street, near the river, though old Vallas is dead. He was a smart, cute, pushing chap, this Chamberlayne; he made himself indispensable to old Vallas, and old Vallas paid him a rare good salary. He settled down in the town, and he married a town girl, one of the Corkindales, the saddlers, when he'd been here three years. Unfortunately she died in childbirth within a year of their marriage. It was very soon after that that Chamberlayne threw up his post at Vallas's, and started busi-

ness as a stock-and-share broker. He'd been a saving man; he'd got a nice bit of money with his wife; he always let it be known that he had money of his own, and he started in a good way. He was a man of the most plausible manners; he'd have coaxed butter out of a dog's throat if he'd wanted to. The moneyed men of the town believed in him—I believed in him myself, Mr. Spargo—I'd many a transaction with him, and I never lost aught by him—on the contrary, he did very well for me. He did well for most of his clients—there were, of course, ups and downs, but on the whole he satisfied his clients uncommonly well. But, naturally, nobody ever knew what was going on between him and Maitland."

"I gather from this report," said Spargo, "that everything came out suddenly—unexpectedly?"

"That was so, sir," replied Mr. Quarterpage. "Sudden? Unexpected? Aye, as a crack of thunder on a fine winter's day. Nobody had the ghost of a notion that anything was wrong. John Maitland was much respected in the town; much thought of by everybody; well known to everybody. I can assure you, Mr. Spargo, that it was no pleasant thing to have to sit on that grand jury as I did—I was its foreman, sir,—and hear a man sentenced that you'd regarded as a bosom friend. But there it was!"

"How was the thing discovered?" asked Spargo, anxious to get at facts.

"In this way," replied Mr. Quarterpage. "The Market Milcaster Bank is in reality almost entirely the property of two old families in the town, the Gutchbys and

the Hostables. Owing to the death of his father, a young Hostable, fresh from college, came into the business. He was a shrewd, keen young fellow; he got some suspicion, somehow, about Maitland, and he insisted on the other partners consenting to a special investigation, and on their making it suddenly. And Maitland was caught before he had a chance. But we're talking about Chamberlayne."

"Yes, about Chamberlayne," agreed Spargo.

"Well, now, Maitland was arrested one evening," continued Mr. Quarterpage. "Of course, the news of his arrest ran through the town like wild-fire. Everybody was astonished; he was at that time—aye, and had been for years—a churchwarden at the Parish Church, and I don't think there could have been more surprise if we'd heard that the Vicar had been arrested for bigamy. In a little town like this, news is all over the place in a few minutes. Of course, Chamberlayne would hear that news like everybody else. But it was remembered, and often remarked upon afterwards, that from the moment of Maitland's arrest nobody in Market Milcaster ever had speech with Chamberlayne again. After his wife's death he'd taken to spending an hour or so of an evening across there at the 'Dragon,' where you saw me and my friends last night, but on that night he didn't go to the 'Dragon.' And next morning he caught the eight o'clock train to London. He happened to remark to the stationmaster as he got into the train that he expected to be back late that night, and that he should have a tiring day of it. But Chamberlayne didn't come back that night, Mr. Spargo. He didn't come back to

Market Milcaster for four days, and when he did come back it was in a coffin!"

"Dead?" exclaimed Spargo. "That was sudden!"

"Very sudden," agreed Mr. Quarterpage. "Yes, sir, he came back in his coffin, did Chamberlayne. On the very evening on which he'd spoken of being back, there came a telegram here to say that he'd died very suddenly at the Cosmopolitan Hotel. That telegram came to his brother-in-law, Corkindale, the saddler—you'll find him down the street, opposite the Town Hall. It was sent to Corkindale by a nephew of Chamberlayne's, another Chamberlayne, Stephen, who lived in London, and was understood to be on the Stock Exchange there. I saw that telegram, Mr. Spargo, and it was a long one. It said that Chamberlayne had had a sudden seizure, and though a doctor had been got to him he'd died shortly afterwards. Now, as Chamberlayne had his nephew and friends in London, his brother-in-law, Tom Corkindale, didn't feel that there was any necessity for him to go up to town, so he just sent off a wire to Stephen Chamberlayne asking if there was aught he could do. And next morning came another wire from Stephen saying that no inquest would be necessary, as the doctor had been present and able to certify the cause of death, and would Corkindale make all arrangements for the funeral two days later. You see, Chamberlayne had bought a vault in our cemetery when he buried his wife, so naturally they wished to bury him in it, with her."

Spargo nodded. He was beginning to imagine all sorts of things and theories; he was taking everything in.

"Well," continued Mr. Quarterpage, "on the second

day after that, they brought Chamberlayne's body down. Three of 'em came with it—Stephen Chamberlayne, the doctor who'd been called in, and a solicitor. Everything was done according to proper form and usage. As Chamberlayne had been well known in the town, a good number of townsfolk met the body at the station and followed it to the cemetery. Of course, many of us who had been clients of Chamberlayne's were anxious to know how he had come to such a sudden end. According to Stephen Chamberlayne's account, our Chamberlayne had wired to him and to his solicitor to meet him at the Cosmopolitan to do some business. They were awaiting him there when he arrived, and they had lunch together. After that, they got to their business in a private room. Towards the end of the afternoon, Chamberlayne was taken suddenly ill, and though they got a doctor to him at once, he died before evening. The doctor said he'd a diseased heart. Anyhow, he was able to certify the cause of his death, so there was no inquest and they buried him, as I have told you."

The old gentleman paused and, taking a sip at his sherry, smiled at some reminiscence which occurred to him.

"Well," he said, presently going on, "of course, on that came all the Maitland revelations, and Maitland vowed and declared that Chamberlayne had not only had nearly all the money, but that he was absolutely certain that most of it was in his hands in hard cash. But Chamberlayne, Mr. Spargo, had left practically nothing. All that could be traced was about three or four thousand pounds. He'd left everything to his nephew,

Stephen. There wasn't a trace, a clue to the vast sums with which Maitland had entrusted him. And then people began to talk, and they said what some of them say to this very day!"

"What's that?" asked Spargo.

Mr. Quarterpage leaned forward and tapped his guest on the arm.

"That Chamberlayne never did die, and that that coffin was weighted with lead!" he answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MAITLAND *ALIAS* MARBURY

This remarkable declaration awoke such a new conception of matters in Spargo's mind, aroused such infinitely new possibilities in his imagination, that for a full moment he sat silently staring at his informant, who chuckled with quiet enjoyment at his visitor's surprise.

"Do you mean to tell me," said Spargo at last, "that there are people in this town who still believe that the coffin in your cemetery which is said to contain Chamberlayne's body contains—lead?"

"Lots of 'em, my dear sir!" replied Mr. Quarterpage. "Lots of 'em! Go out in the street and asked the first six men you meet, and I'll go bail that four out of the six believe it."

"Then why, in the sacred name of common sense did no one ever take steps to make certain?" asked Spargo. "Why didn't they get an order for exhumation?"

"Because it was nobody's particular business to do so," answered Mr. Quarterpage. "You don't know country-town life, my dear sir. In towns like Market Milcaster folks talk and gossip a great deal, but they're always slow to do anything. It's a case of who'll start first—of initiative. And if they see it's going to cost anything—then they'll have nothing to do with it."

"But—the bank people?" suggested Spargo.

Mr. Quarterpage shook his head.

“They’re amongst the lot who believe that Chamberlayne did die,” he said. “They’re very old-fashioned, conservative-minded people, the Gutchbys and the Hostables, and they accepted the version of the nephew, and the doctor, and the solicitor. But now I’ll tell you something about those three. There was a man here in the town, a gentleman of your own profession, who came to edit that paper you’ve got on your knee. He got interested in this Chamberlayne case, and he began to make enquiries with the idea of getting hold of some good—what do you call it?”

“I suppose he’d call it ‘copy,’” said Spargo.

“‘Copy’—that was his term,” agreed Mr. Quarterpage. “Well, he took the trouble to go to London to ask some quiet questions of the nephew, Stephen. That was just twelve months after Chamberlayne had been buried. But he found that Stephen Chamberlayne had left England—months before. Gone, they said, to one of the colonies, but they didn’t know which. And the solicitor had also gone. And the doctor—couldn’t be traced, no, sir, not even through the Medical Register. What do you think of all that, Mr. Spargo?”

“I think,” answered Spargo, “that Market Milcaster folk are considerably slow. I should have had that death and burial enquired into. The whole thing looks to me like a conspiracy.”

“Well, sir, it was, as I say, nobody’s business,” said Mr. Quarterpage. “The newspaper gentleman tried to stir up interest in it, but it was no good. and very soon afterwards he left. And there it is.”

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"Mr. Quarterpage," said Spargo, "what's your own honest opinion?"

The old gentleman smiled.

"Ah!" he said. "I've often wondered, Mr. Spargo, if I really have an opinion on that point. I think that what I probably feel about the whole affair is that there was a good deal of mystery attaching to it. But we seem, sir, to have gone a long way from the question of that old silver ticket which you've got in your purse. Now——"

"No!" said Spargo, interrupting his host with an accompanying wag of his forefinger. "No! I think we're coming nearer to it. Now you've given me a great deal of your time, Mr. Quarterpage, and told me a lot, and, first of all, before I tell you a lot, I'm going to show you something."

And Spargo took out of his pocket-book a carefully-mounted photograph of John Marbury—the original of the process-picture which he had had made for the *Watchman*. He handed it over.

"Do you recognize that photograph as that of anybody you know?" he asked. "Look at it well and closely."

Mr. Quarterpage put on a special pair of spectacles and studied the photograph from several points of view.

"No, sir," he said at last with a shake of the head. "I don't recognize it at all."

"Can't see in it any resemblance to any man you've ever known?" asked Spargo.

"No, sir, none!" replied Mr. Quarterpage. "None whatever."

"Very well," said Spargo, laying the photograph on the table between them. "Now, then, I want you to tell me what John Maitland was like when you knew him. Also, I want you to describe Chamberlayne as he was when he died, or was supposed to die. You remember them, of course, quite well?"

Mr. Quarterpage got up and moved to the door.

"I can do better than that," he said. "I can show you photographs of both men as they were just before Maitland's trial. I have a photograph of a small group of Market Milcaster notabilities which was taken at a municipal garden-party; Maitland and Chamberlayne are both in it. It's been put away in a cabinet in my drawing-room for many a long year, and I've no doubt it's as fresh as when it was taken."

He left the room and presently returned with a large mounted photograph which he laid on the table before his visitor.

"There you are, sir," he said. "Quite fresh, you see—it must be getting on to twenty years since that was taken out of the drawer that it's been kept in. Now, that's Maitland. And that's Chamberlayne."

Spargo found himself looking at a group of men who stood against an ivy-covered wall in the stiff attitudes in which photographers arrange masses of sitters. He fixed his attention on the two figures indicated by Mr. Quarterpage, and saw two medium-heighted, rather sturdily-built men about whom there was nothing very specially noticeable.

"Um!" he said, musingly. "Both bearded."

"Yes, they both wore beards—full beards," assented

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Mr. Quarterpage. "And you see, they weren't so much alike. But Maitland was a much darker man than Chamberlayne, and he had brown eyes, while Chamberlayne's were rather a bright blue."

"The removal of a beard makes a great difference," remarked Spargo. He looked at the photograph of Maitland in the group, comparing it with that of Marbury which he had taken from his pocket. "And twenty years makes a difference, too," he added musingly.

"To some people twenty years makes a vast difference, sir," said the old gentleman. "To others it makes none—I haven't changed much, they tell me, during the past twenty years. But I've known men change—age, almost beyond recognition!—in five years. It depends, sir, on what they go through."

Spargo suddenly laid aside the photographs, put his hands in his pockets, and looked steadfastly at Mr. Quarterpage.

"Look here!" he said. "I'm going to tell you what I'm after, Mr. Quarterpage. I'm sure you've heard all about what's known as the Middle Temple Murder—the Marbury case?"

"Yes, I've read of it," replied Mr. Quarterpage.

"Have you read the accounts of it in my paper, the *Watchman*?" asked Spargo.

Mr. Quarterpage shook his head.

"I've only read one newspaper, sir, since I was a young man," he replied. "I take the *Times*, sir—we always took it, aye, even in the days when newspapers were taxed."

"Very good," said Spargo. "But perhaps I can tell

you a little more than you've read, for I've been working up that case ever since the body of the man known as John Marbury was found. Now, if you'll just give me your attention, I'll tell you the whole story from that moment until—now."

And Spargo, briefly, succinctly, re-told the story of the Marbury case from the first instant of his own connection with it until the discovery of the silver ticket, and Mr. Quarterpage listened in rapt attention, nodding his head from time to time as the younger man made his points.

"And now, Mr. Quarterpage," concluded Spargo, "this is the point I've come to. I believe that the man who came to the Anglo-Orient Hotel as John Marbury and who was undoubtedly murdered in Middle Temple Lane that night, was John Maitland—I haven't a doubt about it after learning what you tell me about the silver ticket. I've found out a great deal that's valuable here, and I think I'm getting nearer to a solution of the mystery. That is, of course, to find out who murdered John Maitland, or Marbury. What you have told me about the Chamberlayne affair has led me to think this—there may have been people, or a person, in London, who was anxious to get Marbury, as we'll call him, out of the way, and who somehow encountered him that night—anxious to silence him, I mean, because of the Chamberlayne affair. And I wondered, as there is so much mystery about him, and as he won't give any account of himself, if this man Aylmore was really Chamberlayne. Yes, I wondered that! But Aylmore's a tall, finely-built man, quite six feet in height, and his beard, though it's now

getting grizzled, has been very dark, and Chamberlayne, you say, was a medium-sized, fair man, with blue eyes."

"That's so, sir," assented Mr. Quarterpage. "Yes, a middling-sized man, and fair—very fair. Deary me, Mr. Spargo!—this is a revelation. And you really think, sir, that John Maitland and John Marbury are one and the same person?"

"I'm sure of it, now," said Spargo. "I see it in this way. Maitland, on his release, went out to Australia, and there he stopped. At last he comes back, evidently well-to-do. He's murdered the very day of his arrival. Aylmore is the only man who knows anything of him—Aylmore won't tell all he knows; that's flat. But Aylmore's admitted that he knew him at some vague date, say from twenty-one to twenty-two or three years ago. Now, where did Aylmore know him? He says in London. That's a vague term. He won't say where—he won't say anything definite—he won't even say what he, Aylmore, himself was in those days. Do you recollect anything of anybody like Aylmore coming here to see Maitland, Mr. Quarterpage?"

"I don't," answered Mr. Quarterpage. "Maitland was a very quiet, retiring fellow, sir: he was about the quietest man in the town. I never remember that he had visitors: certainly I've no recollection of such a friend of his as this Aylmore, from your description of him, would be at that time."

"Did Maitland go up to London much in those days?" asked Spargo.

Mr. Quarterpage laughed.

"Well, now, to show you what a good memory I have,"

he said, "I'll tell you of something that occurred across there at the 'Dragon' only a few months before the Maitland affair came out. There were some of us in there one evening, and, for a rare thing, Maitland came in with Chamberlayne. Chamberlayne happened to remark that he was going up to town next day—he was always to and fro—and we got talking about London. And Maitland said in course of conversation, that he believed he was about the only man of his age in England—and, of course, he meant of his class and means—who'd never even seen London! And I don't think he ever went there between that time and his trial: in fact, I'm sure he didn't, for if he had, I should have heard of it."

"Well, that's queer," remarked Spargo. "It's very queer. For I'm certain Maitland and Marbury are one and the same person. My theory about that old leather box is that Maitland had that carefully planted before his arrest; that he dug it up when he came out of Dartmoor; that he took it off to Australia with him; that he brought it back with him: and that, of course, the silver ticket and the photograph had been in it all these years. Now——"

At that moment the door of the library was opened, and a parlourmaid looked in at her master.

"There's the boots from the 'Dragon' at the front door, sir," she said. "He's brought two telegrams across from there for Mr. Spargo, thinking he might like to have them at once."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ARRESTED

Spargo hurried out to the hall, took the two telegrams from the boots of the "Dragon," and, tearing open the envelopes, read the messages hastily. He went back to Mr. Quarterpage.

"Here's important news," he said as he closed the library door and resumed his seat. "I'll read these telegrams to you, sir, and then we can discuss them in the light of what we've been talking about this morning. The first is from our office. I told you we sent over to Australia for a full report about Marbury at the place he said he hailed from—Coolumbidgee. That report's just reached the *Watchman*, and they've wired it on to me. It's from the chief of police at Coolumbidgee to the editor of the *Watchman*, London:—

"John Marbury came to Coolumbidgee in the winter of 1898-9. He was unaccompanied. He appeared to be in possession of fairly considerable means and bought a share in a small sheep-farm from its proprietor, Andrew Robertson, who is still here, and who says that Marbury never told him anything about himself except that he had emigrated for health reasons and

was a widower. He mentioned that he had had a son who was dead, and was now without relations. He lived a very quiet, steady life on the sheep-farm, never leaving it for many years. About six months ago, however, he paid a visit to Melbourne, and on returning told Robertson that he had decided to return to England in consequence of some news he had received, and must therefore sell his share in the farm. Robertson bought it from him for three thousand pounds, and Marbury shortly afterwards left for Melbourne. From what we could gather, Robertson thinks Marbury was probably in command of five or six thousand when he left Coolumbidgee. He told Robertson that he had met a man in Melbourne who had given him news that surprised him, but did not say what news. He had in his possession when he left Robertson exactly the luggage he brought with him when he came—a stout portmanteau and a small, square leather box. There are no effects of his left behind at Coolumbidgee.”

“That’s all,” said Spargo, laying the first of the telegrams on the table. “And it seems to me to signify a good deal. But now here’s more startling news. This is from Rathbury, the Scotland Yard detective that I told you of, Mr. Quarterpage—he promised, you know, to keep me posted in what went on in my absence. Here’s what he says:

“Fresh evidence tending to incriminate Aylmore has come to hand. Authorities have decided to arrest

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him on suspicion. You'd better hurry back if you want material for to-morrow's paper."

Spargo threw that telegram down, too, waited while the old gentleman glanced at both of them with evident curiosity, and then jumped up.

"Well, I shall have to go, Mr. Quarterpage," he said. "I looked the trains out this morning so as to be in readiness. I can catch the 1.20 to Paddington—that'll get me in before half-past four. I've an hour yet. Now, there's another man I want to see in Market Milcaster. That's the photographer—or a photographer. You remember I told you of the photograph found with the silver ticket? Well, I'm calculating that that photograph was taken here, and I want to see the man who took it—if he's alive and I can find him."

Mr. Quarterpage rose and put on his hat.

"There's only one photographer in this town, sir," he said, "and he's been here for a good many years—Cooper. I'll take you to him—it's only a few doors away."

Spargo wasted no time in letting the photographer know what he wanted. He put a direct question to Mr. Cooper—an elderly man.

"Do you remember taking a photograph of the child of John Maitland, the bank manager, some twenty or twenty-one years ago?" he asked, after Mr. Quarterpage had introduced him as a gentleman from London who wanted to ask a few questions.

"Quite well, sir," replied Mr. Cooper. "As well as if it had been yesterday."

"Do you still happen to have a copy of it?" asked Spargo.

But Mr. Cooper had already turned to a row of file albums. He took down one labelled 1891, and began to search its pages. In a minute or two he laid it on his table before his callers.

"There you are, sir," he said. "That's the child!"

Spargo gave one glance at the photograph and turned to Mr. Quarterpage. "Just as I thought," he said. "That's the same photograph we found in the leather box with the silver ticket. I'm obliged to you, Mr. Cooper. Now, there's just one more question I want to ask. Did you ever supply any further copies of this photograph to anybody after the Maitland affair?—that is, after the family had left the town?"

"Yes," replied the photographer. "I supplied half a dozen copies to Miss Baylis, the child's aunt, who, as a matter of fact, brought him here to be photographed. And I can give you her address, too," he continued, beginning to turn over another old file. "I have it somewhere."

Mr. Quarterpage nudged Spargo.

"That's something I couldn't have done!" he remarked. "As I told you, she'd disappeared from Brighton when enquiries were made after Maitland's release."

"Here you are," said Mr. Cooper. "I sent six copies of that photograph to Miss Baylis in April, 1895. Her address was then 6, Chichester Square, Bayswater, W."

Spargo rapidly wrote this address down, thanked the

photographer for his courtesy, and went out with Mr. Quarterpage. In the street he turned to the old gentleman with a smile.

"Well, I don't think there's much doubt about that!" he exclaimed. "Maitland and Marbury are the same man, Mr. Quarterpage. I'm as certain of that as that I see your Town Hall there."

"And what will you do next, sir?" enquired Mr. Quarterpage.

"Thank you—as I do—for all your kindness and assistance, and get off to town by this 1.20," replied Spargo. "And I shan't fail to let you know how things go on."

"One moment," said the old gentleman, as Spargo was hurrying away, "do you think this Mr. Aylmore really murdered Maitland?"

"No!" answered Spargo with emphasis. "I don't! And I think we've got a good deal to do before we find out who did."

Spargo purposely let the Marbury case drop out of his mind during his journey to town. He ate a hearty lunch in the train and talked with his neighbours; it was a relief to let his mind and attention turn to something else than the theme which had occupied it unceasingly for so many days. But at Reading the newspaper boys were shouting the news of the arrest of a Member of Parliament, and Spargo, glancing out of the window, caught sight of a newspaper placard:

THE MARBURY MURDER CASE ARREST OF MR. AYLMORE

He snatched a paper from a boy as the train moved out and, unfolding it, found a mere announcement in the space reserved for stop-press news:

“Mr. Stephen Aylmore, M.P., was arrested at two o’clock this afternoon, on his way to the House of Commons, on a charge of being concerned in the murder of John Marbury in Middle Temple Lane on the night of June 21st last. It is understood he will be brought up at Bow Street at ten o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Spargo hurried to New Scotland Yard as soon as he reached Paddington. He met Rathbury coming away from his room. At sight of him, the detective turned back.

“Well, so there you are!” he said. “I suppose you’ve heard the news?”

Spargo nodded as he dropped into a chair.

“What led to it?” he asked abruptly. “There must have been something.”

“There was something,” he replied. “The thing—stick, bludgeon, whatever you like to call it, some foreign article—with which Marbury was struck down was found last night.”

“Well?” asked Spargo.

“It was proved to be Aylmore’s property,” answered Rathbury. “It was a South American curio that he had in his rooms in Fountain Court.”

“Where was it found?” asked Spargo.

Rathbury laughed.

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"He was a clumsy fellow who did it, whether he was Aylmore or whoever he was!" he replied. "Do you know, it had been dropped into a sewer-trap in Middle Temple Lane—actually! Perhaps the murderer thought it would be washed out into the Thames and float away. But, of course, it was bound to come to light. A sewer man found it yesterday evening, and it was quickly recognized by the woman who cleans up for Aylmore as having been in his rooms ever since she knew them."

"What does Aylmore say about it?" asked Spargo. "I suppose he's said something?"

"Says that the bludgeon is certainly his, and that he brought it from South America with him," announced Rathbury; "but that he doesn't remember seeing it in his rooms for some time, and thinks that it was stolen from them."

"Um!" said Spargo, musingly. "But—how do you know that was the thing that Marbury was struck down with?"

Rathbury smiled grimly.

"There's some of his hair on it—mixed with blood," he answered. "No doubt about that. Well—anything come of your jaunt westward?"

"Yes," replied Spargo. "Lots!"

"Good?" asked Rathbury.

"Extra good. I've found out who Marbury really was."

"No! Really?"

"No doubt, to my mind. I'm certain of it."

Rathbury sat down at his desk, watching Spargo with rapt attention.

"And who was he?" he asked.

"John Maitland, once of Market Milcaster," replied Spargo. "Ex-bank manager. Also ex-convict."

"Ex-convict!"

"Ex-convict. He was sentenced, at Market Milcaster Quarter Sessions, in autumn, 1891, to ten years' penal servitude, for embezzling the bank's money, to the tune of over two hundred thousand pounds. Served his term at Dartmoor. Went to Australia as soon, or soon after, he came out. That's who Marbury was—Maitland. Dead—certain!"

Rathbury still stared at his caller.

"Go on!" he said. "Tell all about it, Spargo. Let's hear every detail. I'll tell you all I know after. But what I know's nothing to that."

Spargo told him the whole story of his adventures at Market Milcaster, and the detective listened with rapt attention.

"Yes," he said at the end. "Yes—I don't think there's much doubt about that. Well, that clears up a lot, doesn't it?"

Spargo yawned.

"Yes, a whole slate full is wiped off there," he said. "I haven't so much interest in Marbury, or Maitland now. My interest is all in Aylmore."

Rathbury nodded.

"Yes," he said. "The thing to find out is—who is Aylmore, or who was he, twenty years ago?"

"Your people haven't found anything out, then?" asked Spargo.

"Nothing beyond the irreproachable history of Mr.

Aylmore since he returned to this country, a very rich man, some ten years since," answered Rathbury, smiling. "They've no previous dates to go on. What are you going to do next, Spargo?"

"Seek out that Miss Baylis," replied Spargo.

"You think you could get something there?" asked Rathbury.

"Look here!" said Spargo. "I don't believe for a second Aylmore killed Marbury. I believe I shall get at the truth by following up what I call the Maitland trail. This Miss Baylis must know something—if she's alive. Well, now I'm going to report at the office. Keep in touch with me, Rathbury."

He went on then to the *Watchman* office, and as he got out of his taxi-cab at its door, another cab came up and set down Mr. Aylmore's daughters.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE BLANK PAST

Jessie Aylmore came forward to meet Spargo with ready confidence; the elder girl hung back diffidently.

"May we speak to you?" said Jessie. "We have come on purpose to speak to you. Evelyn didn't want to come, but I made her come."

Spargo shook hands silently with Evelyn Aylmore and motioned them both to follow him. He took them straight upstairs to his room and bestowed them in his easiest chairs before he addressed them.

"I've only just got back to town," he said abruptly. "I was sorry to hear the news about your father. That's what's brought you here, of course. But—I'm afraid I can't do much."

"I told you that we had no right to trouble Mr Spargo, Jessie," said Evelyn Aylmore. "What can he do to help us?"

Jessie shook her head impatiently.

"The *Watchman's* about the most powerful paper in London, isn't it?" she said. "And isn't Mr. Spargo writing all these articles about the Marbury case? Mr. Spargo, you must help us!"

Spargo sat down at his desk and began turning over the letters and papers which had accumulated during his absence.

"To be absolutely frank with you," he said, presently, "I don't see how anybody's going to help, so long as your father keeps up that mystery about the past."

"That," said Evelyn, quietly, "is exactly what Ronald says, Jessie. But we can't make our father speak, Mr. Spargo. That he is as innocent as we are of this terrible crime we are certain, and we don't know why he wouldn't answer the questions put to him at the inquest. And—we know no more than you know or anyone knows, and though I have begged my father to speak, he won't say a word. We saw his danger: Ronald—Mr. Breton—told us, and we implored him to tell everything he knew about Mr. Marbury. But so far he has simply laughed at the idea that he had anything to do with the murder, or could be arrested for it, and now——"

"And now he's locked up," said Spargo in his usual matter-of-fact fashion. "Well, there are people who have to be saved from themselves, you know. Perhaps you'll have to save your father from the consequences of his own—shall we say obstinacy? Now, look here, between ourselves, how much do you know about your father's—past?"

The two sisters looked at each other and then at Spargo.

"Nothing," said the elder.

"Absolutely nothing!" said the younger.

"Answer a few plain questions," said Spargo. "I'm not going to print your replies, nor make use of them in any way: I'm only asking the questions with a desire to help you. Have you any relations in England?"

"None that we know of," replied Evelyn.

"Nobody you could go to for information about the past?" asked Spargo.

"No—nobody!"

Spargo drummed his fingers on his blotting-pad. He was thinking hard.

"How old is your father?" he asked suddenly.

"He was fifty-nine a few weeks ago," answered Evelyn.

"And how old are you, and how old is your sister?" demanded Spargo.

"I am twenty, and Jessie is nearly nineteen."

"Where were you born?"

"Both of us at San Gregorio, which is in the San José province of Argentina, north of Monte Video."

"Your father was in business there?"

"He was in business in the export trade, Mr. Spargo. There's no secret about that. He exported all sorts of things to England and to France—skins, hides, wools, dried salts, fruit. That's how he made his money."

"You don't know how long he'd been there when you were born?"

"No."

"Was he married when he went out there?"

"No, he wasn't. We do know that. He's told us the circumstances of his marriage, because they were romantic. When he sailed from England to Buenos Ayres, he met on the steamer a young lady who, he said, was like himself, relationless and nearly friendless. She was going out to Argentina as a governess. She and

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my father fell in love with each other, and they were married in Buenos Ayres soon after the steamer arrived."

"And your mother is dead?"

"My mother died before we came to England. I was eight years old, and Jessie six, then."

"And you came to England—how long after that?"

"Two years."

"So that you've been in England ten years. And you know nothing whatever of your father's past beyond what you've told me?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing."

"Never heard him talk of—you see, according to your account, your father was a man of getting on to forty when he went out to Argentina. He must have had a career of some sort in this country. Have you never heard him speak of his boyhood? Did he never talk of old times, or that sort of thing?"

"I never remember hearing my father speak of any period antecedent to his marriage," replied Evelyn.

"I once asked him a question about his childhood," said Jessie. "He answered that his early days had not been very happy ones, and that he had done his best to forget them. So I never asked him anything again."

"So that it really comes to this," remarked Spargo. "You know nothing whatever about your father, his family, his fortunes, his life, beyond what you yourselves have observed since you were able to observe? That's about it, isn't it?"

"I should say that that is exactly it," answered Evelyn.

"Just so," said Spargo. "And therefore, as I told your sister the other day, the public will say that your father has some dark secret behind him, and that Marbury had possession of it, and that your father killed him in order to silence him. That isn't my view. I not only believe your father to be absolutely innocent, but I believe that he knows no more than a child unborn of Marbury's murder, and I'm doing my best to find out who that murderer was. By the by, since you'll see all about it in tomorrow morning's *Watchman*, I may as well tell you that I've found out who Marbury really was. He——"

At this moment Spargo's door was opened and in walked Ronald Breton. He shook his head at sight of the two sisters.

"I thought I should find you here," he said. "Jessie said she was coming to see you, Spargo. I don't know what good you can do—I don't see what good the most powerful newspaper in the world can do. My God!—everything's about as black as ever it can be. Mr. Aylmore—I've just come away from him; his solicitor, Stratton, and I have been with him for an hour—is obstinate as ever—he will not tell more than he has told. Whatever good can you do, Spargo, when he won't speak about that knowledge of Marbury which he must have?"

"Oh, well!" said Spargo. "Perhaps we can give him some information about Marbury. Mr. Aylmore has forgotten that it's not such a difficult thing to rake up the past as he seems to think it is. For example, as I was just telling these young ladies, I myself have discovered who Marbury really was."

Breton started.

"You have? Without doubt?" he exclaimed.

"Without reasonable doubt. Marbury was an ex-convict."

Spargo watched the effect of this sudden announcement. The two girls showed no sign of astonishment or of unusual curiosity; they received the news with as much unconcern as if Spargo had told them that Marbury was a famous musician. But Ronald Breton started, and it seemed to Spargo that he saw a sense of suspicion dawn in his eyes.

"Marbury—an ex-convict!" he exclaimed. "You mean that?"

"Read your *Watchman* in the morning," said Spargo. "You'll find the whole story there—I'm going to write it tonight when you people have gone. It'll make good reading."

Evelyn and Jessie Aylmore took Spargo's hint and went away, Spargo seeing them to the door with another assurance of his belief in their father's innocence and his determination to hunt down the real criminal. Ronald Breton went down with them to the street and saw them into a cab, but in another minute he was back in Spargo's room as Spargo had expected. He shut the door carefully behind him and turned to Spargo with an eager face.

"I say, Spargo, is that really so?" he asked. "About Marbury being an ex-convict?"

"That's so, Breton. I've no more doubt about it than I have that I see you. Marbury was in reality one John Maitland, a bank manager, of Market Milcaster, who

got ten years' penal servitude in 1891 for embezzlement."

"In 1891? Why—that's just about the time that Aylmore says he knew him!"

"Exactly. And—it just strikes me," said Spargo, sitting down at his desk and making a hurried note, "it just strikes me—didn't Aylmore say he knew Marbury in London?"

"Certainly," replied Breton. "In London."

"Um!" mused Spargo. "That's queer, because Maitland had never been in London up to the time of his going to Dartmoor, whatever he may have done when he came out of Dartmoor, and, of course, Aylmore had gone to South America long before that. Look here, Breton," he continued, aloud, "have you access to Aylmore? Will you, can you, see him before he's brought up at Bow Street tomorrow?"

"Yes," answered Breton. "I can see him with his solicitor."

"Then listen," said Spargo. "Tomorrow morning you'll find the whole story of how I proved Marbury's identity with Maitland in the *Watchman*. Read it as early as you can; get an interview with Aylmore as early as you can; make him read it, every word, before he's brought up. Beg him if he values his own safety and his daughters' peace of mind to throw away all that foolish reserve, and to tell all he knows about Maitland twenty years ago. He should have done that at first. Why, I was asking his daughters some questions before you came in—they know absolutely nothing of their father's history previous to the time when they began to

understand things! Don't you see that Aylmore's career, previous to his return to England, is a blank past?"

"I know—I know!" said Breton. "Yes—although I've gone there a great deal, I never heard Aylmore speak of anything earlier than his Argentine experiences. And yet, he must have been getting on when he went out there."

"Thirty-seven or eight, at least," remarked Spargo. "Well, Aylmore's more or less of a public man, and no public man can keep his life hidden nowadays. By the by, how did you get to know the Aylmores?"

"My guardian, Mr. Elphick, and I met them in Switzerland," answered Breton. "We kept up the acquaintance after our return."

"Mr. Elphick still interesting himself in the Marbury case?" asked Spargo.

"Very much so. And so is old Cardlestone, at the foot of whose stairs the thing came off. I dined with them last night and they talked of little else," said Breton.

"And their theory——"

"Oh, still the murder for the sake of robbery!" replied Breton. "Old Cardlestone is furious that such a thing could have happened at his very door. He says that there ought to be a thorough enquiry into every tenant of the Temple."

"Longish business that," observed Spargo. "Well, run away now, Breton—I must write."

"Shall you be at Bow Street tomorrow morning?" asked Breton as he moved to the door. "It's to be at ten-thirty."

“No, I shan’t!” replied Spargo. “It’ll only be a remand, and I know already just as much as I should hear there. I’ve got something much more important to do. But you’ll remember what I asked of you—get Aylmore to read my story in the *Watchman*, and beg him to speak out and tell all he knows—all!”

And when Breton had gone, Spargo again murmured those last words: “All he knows—all!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MISS BAYLIS

Next day, a little before noon, Spargo found himself in one of those pretentious yet dismal Bayswater squares, which are almost entirely given up to the trade, calling, or occupation of the lodging and boarding-house keeper. They are very pretentious, those squares, with their many-storied houses, their stuccoed frontages, and their pilastered and balconied doorways: innocent country folk, coming into them from the neighbouring station of Paddington, take them to be the residences of the dukes and earls who, of course, live nowhere else but in London. They are further encouraged in this belief by the fact that young male persons in evening dress are often seen at the doorways in more or less elegant attitudes. These, of course, are taken by the country folk to be young lords enjoying the air of Bayswater, but others, more knowing, are aware that they are Swiss or German waiters whose linen might be cleaner.

Spargo gauged the character of the house at which he called as soon as the door was opened to him. There was the usual smell of eggs and bacon, of fish and chops; the usual mixed and ancient collection of overcoats, wraps, and sticks in the hall; the usual sort of parlourmaid to answer the bell. And presently, in answer to his enquiries, there was the usual type of landlady confront-

ing him, a more than middle-aged person who desired to look younger, and made attempts in the way of false hair, teeth, and a little rouge, and who wore that somewhat air and smile which in its wearer—under these circumstances—always means that she is considering whether you will be able to cheat her or whether she will be able to see you.

“You wish to see Miss Baylis?” said this person, examining Spargo closely. “Miss Baylis does not often see anybody.”

“I hope,” said Spargo politely, “that Miss Baylis is not an invalid?”

“No, she’s not an invalid,” replied the landlady; “but she’s not as young as she was, and she’s an objection to strangers. Is it anything I can tell her?”

“No,” said Spargo. “But you can, if you please, take her a message from me. Will you kindly give her my card, and tell her that I wish to ask her a question about John Maitland of Market Milcaster, and that I should be much obliged if she would give me a few minutes.”

“Perhaps you will sit down,” said the landlady. She led Spargo into a room which opened out upon a garden; in it two or three old ladies, evidently inmates, were sitting. The landlady left Spargo to sit with them and to amuse himself by watching them knit or sew or read the papers, and he wondered if they always did these things every day, and if they would go on doing them until a day would come when they would do them no more, and he was beginning to feel very dreary when the door opened and a woman entered whom Spargo, after

one sharp glance at her, decided to be a person who was undoubtedly out of the common. And as she slowly walked across the room towards him he let his first glance lengthen into a look of steady inspection.

The woman whom Spargo thus narrowly inspected was of very remarkable appearance. She was almost masculine; she stood nearly six feet in height; she was of a masculine gait and tread, and spare, muscular, and athletic. What at once struck Spargo about her face was the strange contrast between her dark eyes and her white hair; the hair, worn in abundant coils round a well-shaped head, was of the most snowy whiteness; the eyes of a real coal-blackness, as were also the eyebrows above them. The features were well-cut and of a striking firmness; the jaw square and determined. And Spargo's first thought on taking all this in was that Miss Baylis seemed to have been fitted by Nature to be a prison wardress, or the matron of a hospital, or the governess of an unruly girl, and he began to wonder if he would ever manage to extract anything out of those firmly-locked lips.

Miss Baylis, on her part, looked Spargo over as if she was half-minded to order him to instant execution. And Spargo was so impressed by her that he made a profound bow and found a difficulty in finding his tongue.

"Mr. Spargo?" she said in a deep voice which seemed peculiarly suited to her. "Of, I see, the *Watchman*? You wish to speak to me?"

Spargo again bowed in silence. She signed him to the window near which they were standing.

"Open the casement, if you please," she commanded him. "We will walk in the garden. This is not private."

Spargo obediently obeyed her orders; she swept through the opened window and he followed her. It was not until they had reached the bottom of the garden that she spoke again.

"I understand that you desire to ask me some question about John Maitland, of Market Milcaster?" she said. "Before you put it, I must ask you a question. Do you wish any reply I may give you for publication?"

"Not without your permission," replied Spargo. "I should not think of publishing anything you may tell me except with your express permission."

She looked at him gloomily, seemed to gather an impression of his good faith, and nodded her head.

"In that case," she said, "what do you want to ask?"

"I have lately had reason for making certain enquiries about John Maitland," answered Spargo. "I suppose you read the newspapers and possibly the *Watchman*, Miss Baylis?"

But Miss Baylis shook her head.

"I read no newspapers," she said. "I have no interest in the affairs of the world. I have work which occupies all my time: I give my whole devotion to it."

"Then you have not recently heard of what is known as the Marbury case—a case of a man who was found murdered?" asked Spargo.

"I have not," she answered. "I am not likely to hear such things."

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Spargo suddenly realized that the power of the Press is not quite as great nor as far-reaching as very young journalists hold it to be, and that there actually are, even in London, people who can live quite cheerfully without a newspaper. He concealed his astonishment and went on.

"Well," he said, "I believe that the murdered man, known to the police as John Marbury, was, in reality, your brother-in-law, John Maitland. In fact, Miss Baylis, I'm absolutely certain of it!"

He made this declaration with some emphasis, and looked at his stern companion to see how she was impressed. But Miss Baylis showed no sign of being impressed.

"I can quite believe that, Mr. Spargo," she said coldly. "It is no surprise to me that John Maitland should come to such an end. He was a thoroughly bad and unprincipled man, who brought the most terrible disgrace on those who were, unfortunately, connected with him. He was likely to die a bad man's death."

"I may ask you a few questions about him?" suggested Spargo in his most insinuating manner.

"You may, so long as you do not drag my name into the papers," she replied. "But pray, how do you know that I have the sad shame of being John Maitland's sister-in-law?"

"I found that out at Market Milcaster," said Spargo. "The photographer told me—Cooper."

"Ah!" she exclaimed.

"The questions I want to ask are very simple," said Spargo. "But your answers may materially help me.

You remember Maitland going to prison, of course?"

Miss Baylis laughed—a laugh of scorn.

"Could I ever forget it?" she exclaimed.

"Did you ever visit him in prison?" asked Spargo.

"Visit him in prison!" she said indignantly.

"Visits in prison are to be paid to those who deserve them, who are repentant; not to scoundrels who are hardened in their sin!"

"All right. Did you ever see him after he left prison?"

"I saw him, for he forced himself upon me—I could not help myself. He was in my presence before I was aware that he had even been released."

"What did he come for?" asked Spargo.

"To ask for his son—who had been in my charge," she replied.

"That's a thing I want to know about," said Spargo.

"Do you know what a certain lot of people in Market Milcaster say to this day, Miss Baylis?—they say that you were in at the game with Maitland; that you had a lot of the money placed in your charge; that when Maitland went to prison, you took the child away, first to Brighton, then abroad—disappeared with him—and that you made a home ready for Maitland when he came out. That's what's said by some people in Market Milcaster."

Miss Baylis's stern lips curled.

"People in Market Milcaster!" she exclaimed. "All the people I ever knew in Market Milcaster had about as many brains between them as that cat on the wall there. As for making a home for John Maitland, I

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would have seen him die in the gutter, of absolute want, before I would have given him a crust of dry bread!"

"You appear to have a terrible dislike of this man," observed Spargo, astonished at her vehemence.

"I had—and I have," she answered. "He tricked my sister into a marriage with him when he knew that she would rather have married an honest man who worshipped her; he treated her with quiet, infernal cruelty; he robbed her and me of the small fortunes our father left us."

"Ah!" said Spargo. "Well, so you say Maitland came to you, when he came out of prison, to ask for his boy. Did he take the boy?"

"No—the boy was dead."

"Dead, eh? Then I suppose Maitland did not stop long with you?"

Miss Baylis laughed her scornful laugh.

"I showed him the door!" she said.

"Well, did he tell you that he was going to Australia?" enquired Spargo.

"I should not have listened to anything that he told me, Mr. Spargo," she answered.

"Then, in short," said Spargo, "you never heard of him again?"

"I never heard of him again," she declared passionately, "and I only hope that what you tell me is true, and that Marbury really was Maitland!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MOTHER GUTCH

Spargo, having exhausted the list of questions which he had thought out on his way to Bayswater, was about to take his leave of Miss Baylis, when a new idea suddenly occurred to him, and he turned back to that formidable lady.

"I've just thought of something else," he said. "I told you that I'm certain Marbury was Maitland, and that he came to a sad end—murdered."

"And I've told you," she replied scornfully, "that in my opinion no end could be too bad for him."

"Just so—I understand you," said Spargo. "But I didn't tell you that he was not only murdered but robbed—robbed of probably a good deal. There's good reason to believe that he had securities, bank notes, loose diamonds, and other things on him to the value of a large amount. He'd several thousand pounds when he left Coolumbidgee, in New South Wales, where he'd lived quietly for some years."

Miss Baylis smiled sourly.

"What's all this to me?" she asked.

"Possibly nothing. But you see, that money, those securities, may be recovered. And as the boy you speak

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of is dead, there surely must be somebody who's entitled to the lot. It's worth having, Miss Baylis, and there's strong belief on the part of the police that it will turn up."

This was a bit of ingenious bluff on the part of Spargo; he watched its effect with keen eyes. But Miss Baylis was adamant, and she looked as scornful as ever.

"I say again what's all that to me?" she exclaimed.

"Well, but hadn't the dead boy any relatives on his father's side?" asked Spargo. "I know you're his aunt on the mother's side, and as you're indifferent perhaps, I can find some on the other side. It's very easy to find all these things out, you know."

Miss Baylis, who had begun to stalk back to the house in gloomy and majestic fashion, and had let Spargo see plainly that this part of the interview was distasteful to her, suddenly paused in her stride and glared at the young journalist.

"Easy to find all these things out?" she repeated.

Spargo caught, or fancied he caught, a note of anxiety in her tone. He was quick to turn his fancy to practical purpose.

"Oh, easy enough!" he said. "I could find out all about Maitland's family through that boy. Quite, quite easily!"

Miss Baylis had stopped now, and stood glaring at him. "How?" she demanded.

"I'll tell you," said Spargo with cheerful alacrity. "It is, of course, the easiest thing in the world to trace all about his short life. I suppose I can find the register of his birth at Market Milcaster, and you, of course, will

tell me where he died. By the by, when did he die, Miss Baylis?"

But Miss Baylis was going on again to the house.

"I shall tell you nothing more," she said angrily. "I've told you too much already, and I believe all you're here for is to get some news for your paper. But I will, at any rate tell you this—when Maitland went to prison his child would have been defenceless but for me; he'd have had to go to the workhouse but for me; he hadn't a single relation in the world but me, on either father's or mother's side. And even at my age, old woman as I am, I'd rather beg my bread in the street, I'd rather starve and die, than touch a penny piece that had come from John Maitland! That's all."

Then without further word, without offering to show Spargo the way out, she marched in at the open window and disappeared. And Spargo, knowing no other way, was about to follow her when he heard a sudden rustling sound in the shadow by which they had stood, and the next moment a queer, cracked, horrible voice, suggesting all sorts of things, said distinctly and yet in a whisper:

"Young man!"

Spargo turned and stared at the privet hedge behind him. It was thick and bushy, and in its full summer green, but it seemed to him that he saw a nondescript shape behind. "Who's there?" he demanded. "Somebody listening?"

There was a curious cackle of laughter from behind the hedge; then the cracked, husky voice spoke again.

"Young man, don't you move or look as if you were

talking to anybody. Do you know where the 'King of Madagascar' public-house is in this quarter of the town, young man?"

"No!" answered Spargo. "Certainly not!"

"Well, anybody'll tell you when you get outside, young man," continued the queer voice of the unseen person. "Go there, and wait at the corner by the 'King of Madagascar,' and I'll come there to you at the end of half an hour. Then I'll tell you something, young man—I'll tell you something. Now run away, young man, run away to the 'King of Madagascar'—I'm coming!"

The voice ended in low, horrible cachinnation which made Spargo feel queer. But he was young enough to be in love with adventure, and he immediately turned on his heel without so much as a glance at the privet hedge, and went across the garden and through the house, and let himself out at the door. And at the next corner of the square he met a policeman and asked him if he knew where the "King of Madagascar" was.

"First to the right, second to the left," answered the policeman tersely. "You can't miss it anywhere round there—it's a landmark."

And Spargo found the landmark—a great, square-built tavern—easily, and he waited at a corner of it wondering what he was going to see, and intensely curious about the owner of the queer voice, with all its suggestions of he knew not what. And suddenly there came up to him an old woman and leered at him in a fashion that made him suddenly realize how dreadful old age may be.

Spargo had never seen such an old woman as this in

his life. She was dressed respectably, better than respectably. Her gown was good; her bonnet was smart; her smaller fittings were good. But her face was evil; it showed unmistakable signs of a long devotion to the bottle; the old eyes leered and ogled, the old lips were wicked. Spargo felt a sense of disgust almost amounting to nausea, but he was going to hear what the old harridan had to say and he tried not to look what he felt.

“Well?” he said, almost roughly. “Well?”

“Well, young man, there you are,” said his new acquaintance. “Let us go inside, young man; there’s a quiet little place where a lady can sit and take her drop of gin—I’ll show you. And if you’re good to me, I’ll tell you something about that cat that you were talking to just now. But you’ll give me a little matter to put in my pocket, young man? Old ladies like me have a right to buy little comforts, you know, little comforts.”

Spargo followed this extraordinary person into a small parlour within; the attendant who came in response to a ring showed no astonishment at her presence; he also seemed to know exactly what she required, which was a certain brand of gin, sweetened, and warm. And Spargo watched her curiously as with shaking hand she pushed up the veil which hid little of her wicked old face, and lifted the glass to her mouth with a zest which was not thirst but pure greed of liquor. Almost instantly he saw a new light steal into her eyes, and she laughed in a voice that grew clearer with every sound she made.

“Ah, young man!” she said with a confidential nudge

of the elbow that made Spargo long to get up and fly. "I wanted that! It's done me good. When I've finished that, you'll pay for another for me—and perhaps another? They'll do me still more good. And you'll give me a little matter of money, won't you, young man?"

"Not till I know what I'm giving it for," replied Spargo.

"You'll be giving it because I'm going to tell you that if it's made worth my while I can tell you, or somebody that sent you, more about Jane Baylis than anybody in the world. I'm not going to tell you that now, young man—I'm sure you don't carry in your pocket what I shall want for my secret, not you, by the look of you! I'm only going to show you that I have the secret. Eh?"

"Who are you?" asked Spargo.

The woman leered and chuckled. "What are you going to give me, young man?" she asked.

Spargo put his fingers in his pocket and pulled out two half-sovereigns.

"Look here," he said, showing his companion the coins, "if you can tell me anything of importance you shall have these. But no trifling, now. And no wasting of time. If you have anything to tell, out with it!"

The woman stretched out a trembling, claw-like hand.

"But let me hold one of those, young man!" she implored. "Let me hold one of the beautiful bits of gold. I shall tell you all the better if I hold one of them. Let me—there's a good young gentleman."

Spargo gave her one of the coins, and resigned himself to his fate, whatever it might be.

"You won't get the other unless you tell something," he said. "Who are you, anyway?"

The woman, who had begun mumbling and chuckling over the half-sovereign, grinned horribly.

"At the boarding-house yonder, young man, they call me Mother Gutch," she answered; "but my proper name is Mrs. Sabina Gutch, and once upon a time I was a good-looking young woman. And when my husband died I went to Jane Baylis as housekeeper, and when she retired from that and came to live in that boarding-house where we live now, she was forced to bring me with her and to keep me. Why had she to do that, young man?"

"Heaven knows!" answered Spargo.

"Because I've got a hold on her, young man—I've got a secret of hers," continued Mother Gutch. "She'd be scared to death if she knew I'd been behind that hedge and had heard what she said to you, and she'd be more than scared if she knew that you and I were here, talking. But she's grown hard and near with me, and she won't give me a penny to get a drop of anything with, and an old woman like me has a right to her little comforts, and if you'll buy the secret, young man, I'll split on her, there and then, when you pay the money."

"Before I talk about buying any secret," said Spargo, "you'll have to prove to me that you've a secret to sell that's worth my buying."

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"And I will prove it!" said Mother Gutch with sudden fierceness. "Touch the bell, and let me have another glass, and then I'll tell you. Now," she went on, more quietly—Spargo noticed that the more she drank, the more rational she became, and that her nerves seemed to gain strength and her whole appearance to be improved—"now, you came to her to find out about her brother-in-law, Maitland, that went to prison, didn't you?"

"Well?" demanded Spargo.

"And about that boy of his?" she continued.

"You heard all that was said," answered Spargo.

"I'm waiting to hear what you have to say."

But Mother Gutch was resolute in having her own way. She continued her questions:

"And she told you that Maitland came and asked for the boy, and that she told him the boy was dead, didn't she?" she went on.

"Well?" said Spargo despairingly. "She did. What then?"

Mother Gutch took an appreciative pull at her glass and smiled knowingly. "What then?" she chuckled. "All lies, young man, the boy isn't dead—any more than I am. And my secret is——"

"Well?" demanded Spargo impatiently. "What is it?"

"This!" answered Mother Gutch, digging her companion in the ribs, "I know what she did with him!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

REVELATIONS

Spargo turned on his disreputable and dissolute companion with all his journalistic energies and instincts roused. He had not been sure, since entering the "King of Madagascar," that he was going to hear anything material to the Middle Temple Murder; he had more than once feared that this old gin-drinking harridan was deceiving him, for the purpose of extracting drink and money from him. But now, at the mere prospect of getting important information from her, he forgot all about Mother Gutch's unfortunate propensities, evil eyes, and sodden face; he only saw in her somebody who could tell him something. He turned on her eagerly.

"You say that John Maitland's son didn't die!" he exclaimed.

"The boy did not die," replied Mother Gutch.

"And that you know where he is?" asked Spargo. Mother Gutch shook her head.

"I didn't say that I know where he is, young man," she replied. "I said I knew what she did with him."

"What, then?" demanded Spargo.

Mother Gutch drew herself up in a vast assumption of dignity, and favoured Spargo with a look.

"That's the secret, young man," she said. "I'm will-

ing to sell that secret, but not for two half-sovereigns and two or three drops of cold gin. If Maitland left all that money you told Jane Baylis of, when I was listening to you from behind the hedge, my secret's worth something."

Spargo suddenly remembered his bit of bluff to Miss Baylis. Here was an unexpected result of it.

"Nobody but me can help you to trace Maitland's boy," continued Mother Gutch, "and I shall expect to be paid accordingly. That's plain language, young man."

Spargo considered the situation in silence for a minute or two. Could this wretched, bibulous old woman really be in possession of a secret which would lead to the solving of the mystery of the Middle Temple Murder? Well, it would be a fine thing for the *Watchman* if the clearing up of everything came through one of its men. And the *Watchman* was noted for being generous even to extravagance in laying out money on all sorts of objects: it had spent money like water on much less serious matters than this.

"How much do you want for your secret?" he suddenly asked, turning to his companion.

Mother Gutch began to smooth out a pleat in her gown. It was really wonderful to Spargo to find how very sober and normal this old harridan had become; he did not understand that her nerves had been all a-quiver and on edge when he first met her, and that a resort to her favourite form of alcohol in liberal quantity had calmed and quickened them; secretly he was regarding her with astonishment as the most extraordinary old person he had ever met, and he was almost afraid

of her as he waited for her decision. At last Mother Gutch spoke.

"Well, young man," she said, "having considered matters, and having a right to look well to myself, I think that what I should prefer to have would be one of those annuities. A nice, comfortable annuity, paid weekly—none of your monthlies or quarterlies, but regular and punctual, every Saturday morning. Or Monday morning, as was convenient to the parties concerned—but punctual and regular. I know a good many ladies in my sphere of life as enjoys annuities, and it's a great comfort to have 'em paid weekly."

It occurred to Spargo that Mrs. Gutch would probably get rid of her weekly dole on the day it was paid, whether that day happened to be Monday or Saturday, but that, after all, was no concern of his, so he came back to first principles.

"Even now you haven't said how much," he remarked.

"Three pound a week," replied Mother Gutch. "And cheap, too!"

Spargo thought hard for two minutes. The secret might—might!—lead to something big. This wretched old woman would probably drink herself to death within a year or two. Anyhow, a few hundreds of pounds was nothing to the *Watchman*. He glanced at his watch. At that hour—for the next hour—the great man of the *Watchman* would be at the office. He jumped to his feet, suddenly resolved and alert.

"Here, I'll take you to see my principals," he said. "We'll run along in a taxi-cab."

“With all the pleasure in the world, young man,” replied Mother Gutch; “when you’ve given me that other half-sovereign. As for principals, I’d far rather talk business with masters than with men—though I mean no disrespect to you.”

Spargo, feeling that he was in for it, handed over the second half-sovereign, and busied himself in ordering a taxi-cab. But when that came round he had to wait while Mrs. Gutch consumed a third glass of gin and purchased a flask of the same beverage to put in her pocket. At last he got her off, and in due course to the *Watchman* office, where the hall-porter and the messenger boys stared at her in amazement, well used as they were to seeing strange folk, and he got her to his own room, and locked her in, and then he sought the presence of the mighty.

What Spargo said to his editor and to the great man who controlled the fortunes and workings of the *Watchman* he never knew. It was probably fortunate for him that they were both thoroughly conversant with the facts of the Middle Temple Murder, and saw that there might be an advantage in securing the revelations of which Spargo had got the conditional promise. At any rate, they accompanied Spargo to his room, intent on seeing, hearing and bargaining with the lady he had locked up there.

Spargo’s room smelt heavily of unsweetened gin, but Mother Gutch was soberer than ever. She insisted upon being introduced to proprietor and editor in due and proper form, and in discussing terms with them before going into any further particulars. The editor was all

for temporizing with her until something could be done to find out what likelihood of truth there was in her, but the proprietor, after sizing her up in his own shrewd fashion, took his two companions out of the room.

"We'll hear what the old woman has to say on her own terms," he said. "She may have something to tell that is really of the greatest importance in this case: she certainly has something to tell. And, as Spargo says, she'll probably drink herself to death in about as short a time as possible. Come back—let's hear her story." So they returned to the gin-scented atmosphere, and a formal document was drawn out by which the proprietor of the *Watchman* bound himself to pay Mrs. Gutch the sum of three pounds a week for life (Mrs. Gutch insisting on the insertion of the words "every Saturday morning, punctual and regular") and then Mrs. Gutch was invited to tell her tale. And Mrs. Gutch settled herself to do so, and Spargo prepared to take it down, word for word.

"Which the story, as that young man called it, is not so long as a monkey's tail nor so short as a Manx cat's, gentlemen," said Mrs. Gutch; "but full of meat as an egg. Now, you see, when that Maitland affair at Market Milcaster came off, I was housekeeper to Miss Jane Baylis at Brighton. She kept a boarding-house there, in Kemp Town, and close to the sea-front, and a very good thing she made out of it, and had saved a nice bit, and having, like her sister, Mrs. Maitland, had a little fortune left her by her father, as was at one time a publican here in London, she had a good lump of money. And all that money was in this here Maitland's hands, every penny. I very well remember the day when the news

came about that affair of Maitland robbing the bank. Miss Baylis, she was like a mad thing when she saw it in the paper, and before she'd seen it an hour she was off to Market Milcester. I went up to the station with her, and she told me then before she got in the train that Maitland had all her fortune and her savings, and her sister's, his wife's, too, and that she feared all would be lost."

"Mrs. Maitland was then dead," observed Spargo without looking up from his writing-block.

"She was, young man, and a good thing, too," continued Mrs. Gutch. "Well, away went Miss Baylis, and no more did I hear or see for nearly a week, and then back she comes, and brings a little boy with her—which was Maitland's. And she told me that night that she'd lost every penny she had in the world, and that her sister's money, what ought to have been the child's, was gone, too, and she said her say about Maitland. However, she saw well to that child; nobody could have seen better. And very soon after, when Maitland was sent to prison for ten years, her and me talked about things. 'What's the use,' says I to her, 'of your letting yourself get so fond of that child, and looking after it as you do, and educating it, and so on?' I says. 'Why not?' says she. 'Tisn't yours,' I says, 'you haven't no right to it,' I says. 'As soon as ever its father comes out,' says I, 'he'll come and claim it, and you can't do nothing to stop him.' Well, gentlemen, if you'll believe me, never did I see a woman look as she did when I says all that. And she up and swore that Maitland should never

see or touch the child again—not under no circumstances whatever.”

Mrs. Gutch paused to take a little refreshment from her pocket-flask, with an apologetic remark as to the state of her heart. She resumed, presently, apparently refreshed.

“Well, gentlemen, that notion, about Maitland’s taking the child away from her seemed to get on her mind, and she used to talk to me at times about it, always saying the same thing—that Maitland should never have him. And one day she told me she was going to London to see lawyers about it, and she went, and she came back, seeming more satisfied, and a day or two afterwards, there came a gentleman who looked like a lawyer, and he stopped a day or two, and he came again and again, until one day she came to me, and she says, ‘You don’t know who that gentleman is that’s come so much lately?’ she says. ‘Not I,’ I says, ‘unless he’s after you.’ ‘After me!’ she says, tossing her head: ‘That’s the gentleman that ought to have married my poor sister if that scoundrel Maitland hadn’t tricked her into throwing him over!’ ‘You don’t say so!’ I says. ‘Then by rights he ought to have been the child’s pa!’ ‘He’s going to be a father to the boy,’ she says. ‘He’s going to take him and educate him in the highest fashion, and make a gentleman of him,’ she says, ‘for his mother’s sake.’ ‘Mercy on us!’ says I. ‘What’ll Maitland say when he comes for him?’ ‘Maitland’ll never come for him,’ she says, ‘for I’m going to leave here, and the boy’ll be gone before then. This is all being done,’ she says, ‘so

that the child'll never know his father's shame—he'll never know who his father was.' And true enough, the boy was taken away, but Maitland came before she'd gone, and she told him the child was dead, and I never see a man so cut up. However, it wasn't no concern of mine. And so there's so much of the secret, gentlemen, and I would like to know if I ain't giving good value."

"Very good," said the proprietor. "Go on." But Spargo intervened.

"Did you ever hear the name of the gentleman who took the boy away?" he asked.

"Yes, I did," replied Mrs. Gutch. "Of course I did Which it was Elphick."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

STILL SILENT

Spargo dropped his pen on the desk before him with a sharp clatter that made Mrs. Gutch jump. A steady devotion to the bottle had made her nerves to be none of the strongest, and she looked at the startler of them with angry malevolence.

“Don’t do that again, young man!” she exclaimed sharply. “I can’t a-bear to be jumped out of my skin, and it’s bad manners. I observed that the gentleman’s name was Elphick.”

Spargo contrived to get in a glance at his proprietor and his editor—a glance which came near to being a wink.

“Just so—Elphick,” he said. “A law gentleman I think you said, Mrs. Gutch?”

“I said,” answered Mrs. Gutch, “as how he looked like a lawyer gentleman. And since you’re so particular, young man, though I wasn’t addressing you but your principals, he was a lawyer gentleman. One of the sort that wears wigs and gowns—ain’t I seen his picture in Jane Baylis’s room at the boarding-house where you saw her this morning?”

“Elderly man?” asked Spargo.

“Elderly he will be now,” replied the informant; “but when he took the boy away he was a middle-aged

man. About his age," she added, pointing to the editor in a fashion which made that worthy man wince and the proprietor desire to laugh unconsumedly; "and not so very unlike him neither, being one as had no hair on his face."

"Ah!" said Spargo. "And where did this Mr. Elphick take the boy, Mrs. Gutch?"

But Mrs. Gutch shook her head.

"Ain't no idea," she said. "He took him. Then, as I told you, Maitland came, and Jane Baylis told him that the boy was dead. And after that she never even told me anything about the boy. She kept a tight tongue. Once or twice I asked her, and she says, 'Never you mind,' she says; 'he's all right for life, if he lives to be as old as Methusalem.' And she never said more, and I never said more. But," continued Mrs. Gutch, whose pocket-flask was empty, and who began to wipe tears away, "she's treated me hard has Jane Baylis, never allowing me a little comfort such as a lady of my age should have, and when I hears the two of you a-talking this morning the other side of that privet hedge, thinks I, 'Now's the time to have my knife into you, my fine madam!' And I hope I done it."

Spargo looked at the editor and the proprietor, nodding his head slightly. He meant them to understand that he had got all he wanted from Mother Gutch.

"What are you going to do, Mrs. Gutch, when you leave here?" he asked. "You shall be driven straight back to Bayswater, if you like."

"Which I shall be obliged for, young man," said Mrs. Gutch, "and likewise for the first week of the annuity,

and will call every Saturday for the same at eleven punctual, or can be posted to me on a Friday, whichever is agreeable to you gentlemen. And having my first week in my purse, and being driven to Bayswater, I shall take my boxes and go to a friend of mine where I shall be hearty welcome, shaking the dust of my feet off against Jane Baylis and where I've been living with her."

"Yes, but, Mrs. Gutch," said Spargo, with some anxiety, "if you go back there tonight, you'll be very careful not to tell Miss Baylis that you've been here and told us all this?"

Mrs. Gutch rose, dignified and composed.

"Young man," she said, "you mean well, but you ain't used to dealing with ladies. I can keep my tongue as still as anybody when I like. I wouldn't tell Jane Baylis my affairs—my new affairs, gentlemen, thanks to you—not for two annuities, paid twice a week!"

"Take Mrs. Gutch downstairs, Spargo, and see her all right, and then come to my room," said the editor. "And don't you forget, Mrs. Gutch—keep a quiet tongue in your head—no more talk—or there'll be no annuities on Saturday mornings."

So Spargo took Mother Gutch to the cashier's department and paid her her first week's money, and he got her a taxi-cab, and paid for it, and saw her depart, and then he went to the editor's room, strangely thoughtful. The editor and the proprietor were talking, but they stopped when Spargo entered and looked at him eagerly.

"I think we've done it," said Spargo quietly.

"What, precisely, have we found out?" asked the editor.

“A great deal more than I’d anticipated,” answered Spargo, “and I don’t know what fields it doesn’t open out. If you look back, you’ll remember that the only thing found on Marbury’s body was a scrap of grey paper on which was a name and address—Ronald Breton, King’s Bench Walk.”

“Well?”

“Breton is a young barrister. Also he writes a bit—I have accepted two or three articles of his for our literary page.”

“Well?”

“Further, he is engaged to Miss Aylmore, the eldest daughter of Aylmore, the Member of Parliament who has been charged at Bow Street today with the murder of Marbury.”

“I know. Well, what then, Spargo?”

“But the most important matter,” continued Spargo, speaking very deliberately, “is this—that is, taking that old woman’s statement to be true, as I personally believe it is—that Breton, as he has told me himself (I have seen a good deal of him) was brought up by a guardian. That guardian is Mr. Septimus Elphick, the barrister.”

The proprietor and the editor looked at each other. Their faces wore the expression of men thinking on the same lines and arriving at the same conclusion. And the proprietor suddenly turned on Spargo with a sharp interrogation: “You think then——”

Spargo nodded.

“I think that Mr. Septimus Elphick is the Elphick,

and that Breton is the young Maitland of whom Mrs. Gutch has been talking," he answered.

The editor got up, thrust his hands in his pockets, and began to pace the room.

"If that's so," he said, "if that's so, the mystery deepens. What do you propose to do, Spargo?"

"I think," said Spargo, slowly, "I think that without telling him anything of what we have learnt, I should like to see young Breton and get an introduction from him to Mr. Elphick. I can make a good excuse for wanting an interview with him. If you will leave it in my hands——"

"Yes, yes!" said the proprietor, waving a hand. "Leave it entirely in Spargo's hands."

"Keep me informed," said the editor. "Do what you think. It strikes me you're on the track."

Spargo left their presence, and going back to his own room, still faintly redolent of the personality of Mrs. Gutch, got hold of the reporter who had been present at Bow Street when Aylmore was brought up that morning. There was nothing new; the authorities had merely asked for another remand. So far as the reporter knew, Aylmore had said nothing fresh to anybody.

Spargo went round to the Temple and up to Ronald Breton's chambers. He found the young barrister just preparing to leave, and looking unusually grave and thoughtful. At sight of Spargo he turned back from his outer door, beckoned the journalist to follow him, and led him into an inner room.

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"I say, Spargo!" he said, as he motioned his visitor to take a chair. "This is becoming something more than serious. You know what you told me to do yesterday as regards Aylmore?"

"To get him to tell all?—Yes," said Spargo.

Breton shook his head.

"Stratton—his solicitor, you know—and I saw him this morning before the police-court proceedings," he continued. "I told him of my talk with you; I even went as far as to tell him that his daughters had been to the *Watchman* office. Stratton and I both begged him to take your advice and tell all, everything, no matter at what cost to his private feelings. We pointed out to him the serious nature of the evidence against him; how he had damaged himself by not telling the whole truth at once; how he had certainly done a great deal to excite suspicion against himself; how, as the evidence stands at present, any jury could scarcely do less than convict him. And it was all no good, Spargo!"

"He won't say anything?"

"He'll say no more. He was adamant. 'I told the entire truth in respect to my dealings with Marbury on the night he met his death at the inquest,' he said, over and over again, 'and I shall say nothing further on any consideration. If the law likes to hang an innocent man on such evidence as that, let it!' And he persisted in that until we left him. Spargo, I don't know what's to be done."

"And nothing happened at the police-court?"

"Nothing—another remand. Stratton and I saw Aylmore again before he was removed. He left us with a

sort of sardonic remark—"If you all want to prove me innocent," he said, "find the guilty man."

"Well, there was a tremendous lot of common sense in that," said Spargo.

"Yes, of course, but how, how, how is it going to be done?" exclaimed Breton. "Are you any nearer—is Rathbury any nearer? Is there the slightest clue that will fasten the guilt on anybody else?"

Spargo gave no answer to these questions. He remained silent a while, apparently thinking.

"Was Rathbury in court?" he suddenly asked.

"He was," replied Breton. "He was there with two or three other men who I suppose were detectives, and seemed to be greatly interested in Aylmore."

"If I don't see Rathbury tonight I'll see him in the morning," said Spargo. He rose as if to go, but after lingering a moment, sat down again. "Look here," he continued, "I don't know how this thing stands in law, but would it be a very weak case against Aylmore if the prosecution couldn't show some motive for his killing Marbury?"

Breton smiled.

"There's no necessity to prove motive in murder," he said. "But I'll tell you what, Spargo—if the prosecution can show that Aylmore had a motive for getting rid of Marbury, if they could prove that it was to Aylmore's advantage to silence him—why, then, I don't think he's a chance."

"I see. But so far no motive, no reason for his killing Marbury has been shown."

"I know of none."

Spargo rose and moved to the door.

"Well, I'm off," he said. Then, as if he suddenly recollected something, he turned back. "Oh, by the by," he said, "isn't your guardian, Mr. Elphick, a big authority on philately?"

"One of the biggest. Awful enthusiast."

"Do you think he'd tell me a bit about those Australian stamps which Marbury showed to Criedir, the dealer?"

"Certain, he would—delighted. Here"—and Breton scribbled a few words on a card—"there's his address and a word from me. I'll tell you when you can always find him in, five nights out of seven—at nine o'clock, after he's dined. I'd go with you tonight, but I must go to Aylmore's. The two girls are in terrible trouble."

"Give them a message from me," said Spargo as they went out together. "Tell them to keep up their hearts and their courage."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MR. ELPHICK'S CHAMBERS

Spargo went round again to the Temple that night at nine o'clock, asking himself over and over again two questions—the first, how much does Elphick know? the second, how much shall I tell him?

The old house in the Temple to which he repaired and in which many a generation of old fogies had lived since the days of Queen Anne, was full of stairs and passages, and as Spargo had forgotten to get the exact number of the set of chambers he wanted, he was obliged to wander about in what was a deserted building. So wandering, he suddenly heard steps, firm, decisive steps coming up a staircase which he himself had just climbed. He looked over the banisters down into the hollow beneath. And there, marching up resolutely, was the figure of a tall, veiled woman, and Spargo suddenly realized, with a sharp quickening of his pulses, that for the second time that day he was beneath one roof with Miss Baylis.

Spargo's mind acted quickly. Knowing what he now knew, from his extraordinary dealings with Mother Gutch, he had no doubt whatever that Miss Baylis had come to see Mr. Elphick—come, of course, to tell Mr. Elphick that he, Spargo, had visited her that morning,

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and that he was on the track of the Maitland secret history. He had never thought of it before, for he had been busily engaged since the departure of Mother Gutch; but, naturally, Miss Baylis and Mr. Elphick would keep in communication with each other. At any rate, here she was, and her destination was, surely, Elphick's chambers. And the question for him, Spargo, was—what to do?

What Spargo did was to remain in absolute silence, motionless, tense, where he was on the stair, and to trust to the chance that the woman did not look up. But Miss Baylis neither looked up nor down: she reached a landing, turned along a corridor with decision, and marched forward. A moment later Spargo heard a sharp double knock on a door: a moment after that he heard a door heavily shut; he knew then that Miss Baylis had sought and gained admittance—somewhere.

To find out precisely where that somewhere was drew Spargo down to the landing which Miss Baylis had just left. There was no one about—he had not, in fact, seen a soul since he entered the building. Accordingly he went along the corridor into which he had seen Miss Baylis turn. He knew that all the doors in that house were double ones, and that the outer oak in each was solid and substantial enough to be sound proof. Yet, as men will under such circumstances, he walked softly; he said to himself, smiling at the thought, that he would be sure to start if somebody suddenly opened a door on him. But no hand opened any door, and at last he came to the end of the corridor and found himself confront-

ing a small board on which was painted in white letters on a black ground, Mr. Elphick's Chambers.

Having satisfied himself as to his exact whereabouts, Spargo drew back as quietly as he had come. There was a window half-way along the corridor from which, he had noticed as he came along, one could catch a glimpse of the Embankment and the Thames; to this he withdrew, and leaning on the sill looked out and considered matters. Should he go and—if he could gain admittance—beard these two conspirators? Should he wait until the woman came out and let her see that he was on the track? Should he hide again until she went, and then see Elphick alone?

In the end Spargo did none of these things immediately. He let things slide for the moment. He lighted a cigarette and stared at the river and the brown sails, and the buildings across on the Surrey side. Ten minutes went by—twenty minutes—nothing happened. Then, as half-past nine struck from all the neighbouring clocks, Spargo flung away a second cigarette, marched straight down the corridor and knocked boldly at Mr. Elphick's door.

Greatly to Spargo's surprise, the door was opened before there was any necessity to knock again. And there, calmly confronting him, a benevolent, yet somewhat deprecating expression on his spectacled and placid face, stood Mr. Elphick, a smoking cap on his head, a tasseled smoking jacket over his dress shirt, and a short pipe in his hand.

Spargo was taken aback: Mr. Elphick apparently was

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not. He held the door well open, and motioned the journalist to enter.

"Come in, Mr. Spargo," he said. "I was expecting you. Walk forward into my sitting-room."

Spargo, much astonished at this reception, passed through an ante-room into a handsomely furnished apartment full of books and pictures. In spite of the fact that it was still very little past midsummer there was a cheery fire in the grate, and on a table set near a roomy arm-chair was set such creature comforts as a spirit-case, a syphon, a tumbler, and a novel—from which things Spargo argued that Mr. Elphick had been taking his ease since his dinner. But in another arm-chair on the opposite side of the hearth was the forbidding figure of Miss Baylis, blacker, gloomier, more mysterious than ever. She neither spoke nor moved when Spargo entered: she did not even look at him. And Spargo stood staring at her until Mr. Elphick, having closed his doors, touched him on the elbow, and motioned him courteously to a seat.

"Yes, I was expecting you, Mr. Spargo," he said, as he resumed his own chair. "I have been expecting you at any time, ever since you took up your investigation of the Marbury affair, in some of the earlier stages of which you saw me, you will remember, at the mortuary. But since Miss Baylis told me, twenty minutes ago, that you had been to her this morning I felt sure that it would not be more than a few hours before you would come to me."

"Why, Mr. Elphick, should you suppose that I should

come to you at all?" asked Spargo, now in full possession of his wits.

"Because I felt sure that you would leave no stone unturned, no corner unexplored," replied Mr. Elphick. "The curiosity of the modern pressman is insatiable."

Spargo stiffened.

"I have no curiosity, Mr. Elphick," he said. "I am charged by my paper to investigate the circumstances of the death of the man who was found in Middle Temple Lane, and, if possible, to track his murderer, and——"

Mr. Elphick laughed slightly and waved his hand.

"My good young gentleman!" he said. "You exaggerate your own importance. I don't approve of modern journalism nor of its methods. In your own case you have got hold of some absurd notion that the man John Marbury was in reality one John Maitland, once of Market Milcaster, and you have been trying to frighten Miss Baylis here into——"

Spargo suddenly rose from his chair. There was a certain temper in him which, when once roused, led him to straight hitting, and it was roused now. He looked the old barrister full in the face.

"Mr. Elphick," he said, "you are evidently unaware of all that I know. So I will tell you what I will do. I will go back to my office, and I will write down what I do know, and give the true and absolute proofs of what I know, and, if you will trouble yourself to read the *Watchman* tomorrow morning, then you, too, will know."

"Dear me—dear me!" said Mr. Elphick, banteringly. "We are so used to ultra-sensational stories from the *Watchman* that—but I am a curious and inquisitive old man, my good young sir, so perhaps you will tell me in a word what it is you do know, eh?"

Spargo reflected for a second. Then he bent forward across the table and looked the old barrister straight in the face.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I will tell you what I know beyond doubt. I know that the man murdered under the name of John Marbury was, without doubt, John Maitland, of Market Milcaster, and that Ronald Breton is his son, whom you took from that woman!"

If Spargo had desired a complete revenge for the cavalier fashion in which Mr. Elphick had treated it he could not have been afforded a more ample one than that offered to him by the old barrister's reception of this news. Mr. Elphick's face not only fell, but changed; his expression of almost sneering contempt was transformed to one clearly resembling abject terror; he dropped his pipe, fell back in his chair, recovered himself, gripped the chair's arms, and stared at Spargo as if the young man had suddenly announced to him that in another minute he must be led to instant execution. And Spargo, quick to see his advantage, followed it up.

"That is what I know, Mr. Elphick, and if I choose, all the world shall know it tomorrow morning!" he said firmly. "Ronald Breton is the son of the murdered man, and Ronald Breton is engaged to be married to the daughter of the man charged with the murder. Do you

hear that? It is not matter of suspicion, or of idea, or of conjecture, it is fact—fact!”

Mr. Elphick slowly turned his face to Miss Baylis. He gasped out a few words.

“You—did—not—tell—me—this!”

Then Spargo, turning to the woman, saw that she, too, was white to the lips and as frightened as the man.

“I—didn’t know!” she muttered. “He didn’t tell me. He only told me this morning what—what I’ve told you.”

Spargo picked up his hat.

“Good-night, Mr. Elphick,” he said.

But before he could reach the door the old barrister had leapt from his chair and seized him with trembling hands. Spargo turned and looked at him. He knew then that for some reason or other he had given Mr. Septimus Elphick a thoroughly bad fright.

“Well?” he growled.

“My dear young gentleman!” implored Mr. Elphick. “Don’t go! I’ll—I’ll do anything for you if you won’t go away to print that. I’ll—I’ll give you a thousand pounds!”

Spargo shook him off.

“That’s enough!” he snarled. “Now, I am off! What, you’d try to bribe me?”

Mr. Elphick wrung his hands.

“I didn’t mean that—indeed I didn’t!” he almost wailed. “I—I don’t know what I meant. Stay, young gentleman, stay a little, and let us—let us talk. Let me have a word with you—as many words as you please. I implore you!”

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Spargo made a fine pretence of hesitation.

"If I stay," he said, at last, "it will only be on the strict condition that you answer—and answer truly—whatever questions I like to ask you. Otherwise——"

He made another move to the door, and again Mr. Elphick laid beseeching hands on him.

"Stay!" he said. "I'll answer anything you like!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

OF PROVED IDENTITY

Spargo sat down again in the chair which he had just left, and looked at the two people upon whom his startling announcement had produced such a curious effect. And he recognized as he looked at them that, while they were both frightened, they were frightened in different ways. Miss Baylis had already recovered her composure; she now sat sombre and stern as ever, returning Spargo's look with something of indifferent defiance; he thought he could see that in her mind a certain fear was battling with a certain amount of wonder that he had discovered the secret. It seemed to him that so far as she was concerned the secret had come to an end; it was as if she said in so many words that now the secret was out he might do his worst.

But upon Mr. Septimus Elphick the effect was very different. He was still trembling from excitement; he groaned as he sank into his chair and the hand with which he poured out a glass of spirits shook; the glass rattled against his teeth when he raised it to his lips. The half-contemptuous fashion of his reception of Spargo had now wholly disappeared; he was a man who had received a shock, and a bad one. And Spargo, watching him keenly, said to himself: This man knows a great deal more than, a great deal beyond, the mere fact that

Marbury was Maitland, and that Ronald Breton is in reality Maitland's son; he knows something which he never wanted anybody to know, which he firmly believed it impossible anybody ever could know. It was as if he had buried something deep, deep down in the lowest depths, and was as astounded as he was frightened to find that it had been at last flung up to the broad light of day.

"I shall wait," suddenly said Spargo, "until you are composed, Mr. Elphick. I have no wish to distress you. But I see, of course, that the truths which I have told you are of a sort that cause you considerable—shall we say fear?"

Elphick took another stiff pull at his liquor. His hand had grown steadier, and the colour was coming back to his face.

"If you will let me explain," he said. "If you will hear what was done for the boy's sake—eh?"

"That," answered Spargo, "is precisely what I wish. I can tell you this—I am the last man in the world to wish harm of any sort to Mr. Breton."

Miss Baylis relieved her feelings with a scornful sniff.

"He says that!" she exclaimed, addressing the ceiling. "He says that, knowing that he means to tell the world in his rag of a paper that Ronald Breton, on whom every care has been lavished, is the son of a scoundrel, an ex-convict, a——"

Elphick lifted his hand.

"Hush—hush!" he said imploringly. "Mr. Spargo means well, I am sure—I am convinced. If Mr. Spargo will hear me——"

But before Spargo could reply, a loud insistent knocking came at the outer door. Elphick started nervously, but presently he moved across the room, walking as if he had received a blow, and opened the door. A boy's voice penetrated into the sitting-room.

"If you please, sir, is Mr. Spargo, of the *Watchman*, here? He left this address in case he was wanted."

Spargo recognized the voice as that of one of the office messenger boys, and jumping up, went to the door.

"What is it, Rawlins?" he asked.

"Will you please come back to the office, sir, at once? There's Mr. Rathbury there and says he must see you instantly."

"All right," answered Spargo. "I'm coming just now."

He motioned the lad away, and turned to Elphick.

"I shall have to go," he said. "I may be kept. Now, Mr. Elphick, can I come to see you tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, yes, tomorrow morning!" replied Elphick eagerly. "Tomorrow morning, certainly. At eleven—eleven o'clock. That will do?"

"I shall be here at eleven," said Spargo. "Eleven sharp."

He was moving away when Elphick caught him by the sleeve.

"A word—just a word!" he said. "You—you have not told the—the boy—Ronald—of what you know? You haven't?"

"I haven't," replied Spargo.

Elphick tightened his grip on Spargo's sleeve. He looked into his face beseechingly.

"Promise me—promise me, Mr. Spargo, that you won't tell him until you have seen me in the morning!" he implored. "I beg you to promise me this."

Spargo hesitated, considering matters.

"Very well—I promise," he said.

"And you won't print it?" continued Elphick, still clinging to him. "Say you won't print it tonight?"

"I shall not print it tonight," answered Spargo. "That's certain."

Elphick released his grip on the young man's arm.

"Come—at eleven tomorrow morning," he said, and drew back and closed the door.

Spargo ran quickly to the office and hurried up to his own room. And there, calmly seated in an easy-chair, smoking a cigar, and reading an evening newspaper, was Rathbury, unconcerned and outwardly as imperturbable as ever. He greeted Spargo with a careless nod and a smile.

"Well," he said, "how's things?"

Spargo, half-breathless, dropped into his desk-chair.

"You didn't come here to tell me that," he said.

Rathbury laughed.

"No," he said, throwing the newspaper aside, "I didn't. I came to tell you my latest. You're at full liberty to stick it into your paper tonight: it may just as well be known."

"Well?" said Spargo.

Rathbury took his cigar out of his lips and yawned.

"Aylmore's identified," he said lazily.

Spargo sat up, sharply.

"Identified!"

"Identified, my son. Beyond doubt."

"But as whom—as what?" exclaimed Spargo.

Rathbury laughed.

"He's an old lag—an ex-convict. Served his time partly at Dartmoor. That, of course, is where he met Maitland or Marbury. D'ye see? Clear as noontide now, Spargo."

Spargo sat drumming his fingers on the desk before him. His eyes were fixed on a map of London that hung on the opposite wall; his ears heard the throbbing of the printing-machines far below. But what he really saw was the faces of the two girls; what he really heard was the voices of two girls . . .

"Clear as noontide—as noontide," repeated Rathbury with great cheerfulness.

Spargo came back to the earth of plain and brutal fact.

"What's clear as noontide?" he asked sharply.

"What? Why, the whole thing! Motive—everything," answered Rathbury. "Don't you see, Maitland and Aylmore (his real name is Ainsworth, by the by) meet at Dartmoor, probably, or, rather, certainly, just before Aylmore's release. Aylmore goes abroad, makes money, in time comes back, starts new career, gets into Parliament, becomes big man. In time, Maitland, who, after his time, has also gone abroad, also comes back. The two meet. Maitland probably tries to blackmail Aylmore or threatens to let folk know that the flourishing Mr. Aylmore, M.P., is an ex-convict. Result—Ayl-

more lures him to the Temple and quiets him. Pooh! —the whole thing's clear as noontide, as I say. As—noontide!”

Spargo drummed his fingers again.

“How?” he asked quietly. “How came Aylmore to be identified?”

“My work,” said Rathbury proudly. “My work, my son. You see, I thought a lot. And especially after we'd found out that Marbury was Maitland.”

“You mean after I'd found out,” remarked Spargo.

Rathbury waved his cigar.

“Well, well, it's all the same,” he said. “You help me, and I help you, eh? Well, as I say, I thought a considerable lot. I thought—now, where did Maitland, or Marbury, know or meet Aylmore twenty or twenty-two years ago? Not in London, because we knew Maitland never was in London—at any rate, before his trial, and we haven't the least proof that he was in London after. And why won't Aylmore tell? Clearly because it must have been in some undesirable place. And then, all of a sudden, it flashed on me in a moment of—what do you writing fellows call those moments, Spargo?”

“Inspiration, I should think,” said Spargo. “Direct inspiration.”

“That's it. In a moment of direct inspiration, it flashed on me—why, twenty years ago, Maitland was in Dartmoor—they must have met there! And so, we got some old warders who'd been there at that time to come to town, and we gave 'em opportunities to see Aylmore and to study him. Of course, he's twenty years older, and he's grown a beard, but they began to recall him,

and then one man remembered that if he was the man they thought he'd a certain birth-mark. And—he has!"

"Does Aylmore know that he's been identified?" asked Spargo.

Rathbury pitched his cigar into the fireplace and laughed.

"Know!" he said scornfully. "Know? He's admitted it. What was the use of standing out against proof like that. He admitted it tonight in my presence. Oh, he knows all right!"

"And what did he say?"

Rathbury laughed contemptuously.

"Say? Oh, not much. Pretty much what he said about this affair—that when he was convicted the time before he was an innocent man. He's certainly a good hand at playing the innocent game."

"And of what was he convicted?"

"Oh, of course, we know all about it—now. As soon as we found out who he really was, we had all the particulars turned up. Aylmore, or Ainsworth (Stephen Ainsworth his name really is) was a man who ran a sort of what they call a Mutual Benefit Society in a town right away up in the North—Cloudhampton—some thirty years ago. He was nominally secretary, but it was really his own affair. It was patronized by the working classes—Cloudhampton's a purely artisan population—and they stuck a lot of their brass, as they call it, in it. Then suddenly it came to smash, and there was nothing. He—Ainsworth, or Aylmore—pleaded that he was robbed and duped by another man, but the court

didn't believe him, and he got seven years. Plain story you see, Spargo, when it all comes out, eh?"

"All stories are quite plain—when they come out," observed Spargo. "And he kept silence now, I suppose, because he didn't want his daughters to know about his past?"

"Just so," agreed Rathbury. "And I don't know that I blame him. He thought, of course, that he'd go scot-free over this Marbury affair. But he made his mistake in the initial stages, my boy—oh, yes!"

Spargo got up from his desk and walked around his room for a few minutes, Rathbury meanwhile finding and lighting another cigar. At last Spargo came back and clapped a hand on the detective's shoulder.

"Look here, Rathbury!" he said. "It's very evident that you're now going on the lines that Aylmore did murder Marbury. Eh?"

Rathbury looked up. His face showed astonishment.

"After evidence like that!" he exclaimed. "Why, of course. There's the motive, my son, the motive!"

Spargo laughed.

"Rathbury!" he said. "Aylmore no more murdered Marbury than you did!"

The detective got up and put on his hat.

"Oh!" he said. "Perhaps you know who did, then?"

"I shall know in a few days," answered Spargo.

Rathbury stared wondering at him. Then he suddenly walked to the door. "Good-night!" he said gruffly.

"Good-night, Rathbury," replied Spargo and sat down at his desk.

But that night Spargo wrote nothing for the *Watchman*. All he wrote was a short telegram addressed to Aylmore's daughters. There were only three words on it—*Have no fear*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE CLOSED DOORS

Alone of all the London morning newspapers, the *Watchman* appeared next day destitute of sensationalism in respect to the Middle Temple Murder. The other daily journals published more or less vivid accounts of the identification of Mr. Stephen Aylmore, M.P. for the Brookminster Division, as the *ci-devant* Stephen Ainsworth, ex-convict, once upon a time founder and secretary of the Hearth and Home Mutual Benefit Society, the headquarters of which had been at Cloudhampton, in Daleshire; the fall of which had involved thousands of honest working folk in terrible distress if not in absolute ruin. Most of them had raked up Ainsworth's past to considerable journalistic purpose: it had been an easy matter to turn up old files, to recount the fall of the Hearth and Home, to tell anew the story of the privations of the humble investors whose small hoards had gone in the crash; it had been easy, too, to set out again the history of Ainsworth's arrest, trial, and fate. There was plenty of romance in the story: it was that of a man who by his financial ability had built up a great industrial insurance society; had—as was alleged—converted the large sums entrusted to him to his own purposes; had

been detected and punished; had disappeared, after his punishment, so effectually that no one knew where he had gone; had come back, comparatively a few years later, under another name, a very rich man, and had entered Parliament and been, in a modest way, a public character without any of those who knew him in his new career suspecting that he had once worn a dress liberally ornamented with the broad arrow. Fine copy, excellent copy: some of the morning newspapers made a couple of columns of it.

But the *Watchman*, up to then easily ahead of all its contemporaries in keeping the public informed of all the latest news in connection with the Marbury affair, contented itself with a brief announcement. For after Rathbury had left him, Spargo had sought his proprietor and his editor, and had sat long in consultation with them, and the result of their talk had been that all the *Watchman* thought fit to tell its readers next morning was contained in a curt paragraph:

“We understand that Mr. Stephen Aylmore, M.P., who is charged with the murder of John Marbury, or Maitland, in the Temple on June 21st last, was yesterday afternoon identified by certain officials as Stephen Ainsworth, who was sentenced to a term of penal servitude in connection with the Hearth and Home Mutual Benefit Society funds nearly thirty years ago.”

Coming down to Fleet Street that morning, Spargo, strolling jauntily along the front of the Law Courts, encountered a fellow-journalist, a man on an opposition newspaper, who grinned at him in a fashion which indicated derision.

“Left behind a bit, that rag of yours, this morning, Spargo, my boy!” he remarked elegantly. “Why, you’ve missed one of the finest opportunities I ever heard of in connection with that Aylmore affair. A miserable paragraph!—why, I worked off a column and a half in ours! What were you doing last night, old man?”

“Sleeping,” said Spargo and went by with a nod. “Sleeping!”

He left the other staring at him, and crossed the road to Middle Temple Lane. It was just on the stroke of eleven as he walked up the stairs to Mr. Elphick’s chambers; precisely eleven as he knocked at the outer door. It is seldom that outer doors are closed in the Temple at that hour, but Elphick’s door was closed fast enough. The night before it had been promptly opened, but there was no response to Spargo’s first knock, nor to his second, nor to his third. And half-unconsciously he murmured aloud: “Elphick’s door is closed!”

It never occurred to Spargo to knock again: instinct told him that Elphick’s door was closed because Elphick was not there; closed because Elphick was not going to keep the appointment. He turned and walked slowly back along the corridor. And just as he reached the head of the stairs Ronald Breton, pale and anxious, came running up them, and at sight of Spargo paused, staring questioningly at him. As if with a mutual sympathy the two young men shook hands.

“I’m glad you didn’t print more than those two or three lines in the *Watchman* this morning,” said Breton. “It was—considerate. As for the other papers!—Aylmore assured me last night, Spargo, that though he did

serve that term at Dartmoor he was innocent enough! He was scapegoat for another man who disappeared."

Then, as Spargo merely nodded, he added, awkwardly:

"And I'm obliged to you, too, old chap, for sending that wire to the two girls last night—it was good of you. They want all the comfort they can get, poor things! But—what are you doing here, Spargo?"

Spargo leant against the head of the stairs and folded his hands.

"I came here," he said, "to keep an appointment with Mr. Elphick—an appointment which he made when I called on him, as you suggested, at nine o'clock. The appointment—a most important one—was for eleven o'clock."

Breton glanced at his watch.

"Come on, then," he said. "It's well past that now, and my guardian's a very martinet in the matter of punctuality."

But Spargo did not move. Instead, he shook his head, regarding Breton with troubled eyes.

"So am I," he answered. "I was trained to it. Your guardian isn't there, Breton."

"Not there? If he made an appointment for eleven? Nonsense—I never knew him miss an appointment!"

"I knocked three times—three separate times," answered Spargo.

"You should have knocked half a dozen times—he may have overslept himself. He sits up late—he and old Cardlestone often sit up half the night, talking stamps or playing piquet," said Breton. "Come on—you'll see!"

Spargo shook his head again.

"He's not there, Breton," he said. "He's gone!"

Breton stared at the journalist as if he had just announced that he had seen Mr. Septimus Elphick riding down Fleet Street on a dromedary. He seized Spargo's elbow.

"Come on!" he said. "I have a key to Mr. Elphick's door, so that I can go in and out as I like. I'll soon show you whether he's gone or not."

Spargo followed the young barrister down the corridor.

"All the same," he said meditatively as Breton fitted a key to the latch, "he's not there, Breton. He's—off!"

"Good heavens, man, I don't know what you're talking about!" exclaimed Breton, opening the door and walking into the lobby. "Off! Where on earth should he be off to, when he's made an appointment with you for eleven, and—Hullo!"

He had opened the door of the room in which Spargo had met Elphick and Miss Baylis the night before, and was walking in when he pulled himself up on the threshold with a sharp exclamation.

"Good God!" he cried. "What—what's all this?"

Spargo quietly looked over Breton's shoulder. It needed but one quick glance to show him that much had happened in that quiet room since he had quitted it the night before. There stood the easy-chair in which he had left Elphick; there, close by it, but pushed aside, as if by a hurried hand, was the little table with its

spirit case, its syphon, its glass, in which stale liquid still stood; there was the novel, turned face downwards; there, upon the novel, was Elphick's pipe. But the rest of the room was in dire confusion. The drawers of a bureau had been pulled open and never put back; papers of all descriptions, old legal-looking documents, old letters, littered the centre-table and the floor; in one corner of the room a black japanned box had been opened, its contents strewn about, and the lid left yawning. And in the grate, and all over the fender there were masses of burned and charred paper; it was only too evident that the occupant of the chambers, wherever he might have disappeared to, had spent some time before his disappearance in destroying a considerable heap of documents and papers, and in such haste that he had not troubled to put matters straight before he went.

Breton stared at this scene for a moment in utter consternation. Then he made one step towards an inner door, and Spargo followed him. Together they entered an inner room—a sleeping apartment. There was no one in it, but there were evidences that Elphick had just as hastily packed a bag as he had destroyed his papers. The clothes which Spargo had seen him wearing the previous evening were flung here, there, everywhere; the gorgeous smoking-jacket was tossed unceremoniously in one corner, a dress-shirt, in the bosom of which valuable studs still glistened, in another. One or two suitcases lay about, as if they had been examined and discarded in favour of something more portable; here, too, drawers, revealing stocks of linen and underclothing,

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had been torn open and left open; open, too, swung the door of a wardrobe, revealing a quantity of expensive clothing. And Spargo, looking around him, seemed to see all that had happened—the hasty, almost frantic search for and tearing up and burning of papers; the hurried change of clothing, of packing necessities into a bag that could be carried, and then the flight the getting away, the——

“What on earth does all this mean?” exclaimed Breton. “What is it, Spargo?”

“I mean exactly what I told you,” answered Spargo. “P’s off! Off!”

“Off! But why off? What—my guardian!—as quiet an old gentleman as there is in the Temple—off!” cried Breton. “For what reason, eh? It isn’t—good God, Spargo, it isn’t because of anything you said to him last night!”

“I should say it is precisely because of something that I said to him last night,” replied Spargo. “I was a fool ever to let him out of my sight.”

Breton turned on his companion and gasped.

“Out—of—your—sight!” he exclaimed. “Why—why—you don’t mean to say that Mr. Elphick has anything to do with this Marbury affair? For God’s sake, Spargo——”

Spargo laid a hand on the young barrister’s shoulder.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to hear a good deal, Breton,” he said. “I was going to talk to you today in any case. You see——”

Before Spargo could say more a woman, bearing the implements which denote the charwoman’s profession

entered the room and immediately cried out at what she saw. Breton turned on her almost savagely.

"Here, you!" he said. "Have you seen anything of Mr. Elphick this morning?"

The charwoman rolled her eyes and lifted her hands.

"Me, sir! Not a sign of him, sir. Which I never comes here much before half-past eleven, sir, Mr. Elphick being then gone out to his breakfast. I see him yesterday morning, sir, which he was then in his usual state of good health, sir, if anything's the matter with him now. No, sir, I ain't seen nothing of him."

Breton let out another exclamation of impatience.

"You'd better leave all this," he said. "Mr. Elphick's evidently gone away in a hurry, and you mustn't touch anything here until he comes back. I'm going to lock up the chambers: if you've a key of them give it to me."

The charwoman handed over a key, gave another astonished look at the rooms, and vanished, muttering, and Breton turned to Spargo.

"What do you say?" he demanded. "I must hear—a good deal! Out with it, then, man, for Heaven's sake."

But Spargo shook his head.

"Not now, Breton," he answered. "Presently, I tell you, for Miss Aylmore's sake, and your own, the first thing to do is to get on your guardian's track. We must—must, I say!—and at once."

Breton stood staring at Spargo for a moment as if he could not credit his own senses. Then he suddenly motioned Spargo out of the room.

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"Come on!" he said. "I know who'll know where he is, if anybody does."

"Who, then?" asked Spargo, as they hurried out.

"Cardlestone," answered Breton, grimly. "Cardlestone!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

REVELATION

There was as much bright sunshine that morning in Middle Temple Lane as ever manages to get into it, and some of it was shining in the entry into which Spargo and Breton presently hurried. Full of haste as he was Breton paused at the foot of the stair. He looked down at the floor and at the wall at its side.

"Wasn't it there?" he said in a low voice, pointing at the place he looked at. "Wasn't it there, Spargo, just there, that Marbury, or, rather, Maitland, was found?"

"It was just there," answered Spargo.

"You saw him?"

"I saw him."

"Soon—afterwards?"

"Immediately after he was found. You know all that, Breton. Why do you ask now?"

Breton, who was still staring at the place on which he had fixed his eyes on walking into the entry, shook his head.

"Don't know," he answered. "I—but come on—let's see if old Cardlestone can tell us anything."

There was another charwoman, armed with pails and buckets, outside Cardlestone's door, into which she was just fitting a key. It was evident to Spargo that she

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knew Breton, for she smiled at him as she opened the door.

"I don't think Mr. Cardlestone'll be in, sir," she said. "He's generally gone out to breakfast at this time—him and Mr. Elphick goes together."

"Just see," said Breton. "I want to see him if he is in." The charwoman entered the chambers and immediately screamed.

"Quite so," remarked Spargo. "That's what I expected to hear. Cardlestone, you see, Breton, is also—off!"

Breton made no reply. He rushed after the charwoman, with Spargo in close attendance.

"Good God—another!" groaned Breton.

If the confusion in Elphick's rooms had been bad, that in Cardlestone's chambers was worse. Here again all the features of the previous scene were repeated—drawers had been torn open, papers thrown about; the hearth was choked with light ashes; everything was at sixes and sevens. An open door leading into an inner room showed that Cardlestone, like Elphick, had hastily packed a bag; like Elphick had changed his clothes, and had thrown his discarded garments anywhere, into any corner. Spargo began to realize what had taken place—Elphick, having made his own preparations for flight, had come to Cardlestone, and had expedited him, and they had fled together. But—why?

The charwoman sat down in the nearest chair and began to moan and sob; Breton strode forward, across the heaps of papers and miscellaneous objects tossed aside in that hurried search and clearing up, into the inner

room. And Spargo, looking about him, suddenly caught sight of something lying on the floor at which he made a sharp clutch. He had just secured it and hurried it into his pocket when Breton came back.

"I don't know what all this means, Spargo," he said, almost wearily. "I suppose you do. Look here," he went on, turning to the charwoman, "stop that row—that'll do no good, you know. I suppose Mr. Cardlestone's gone away in a hurry. You'd better—what had she better do, Spargo?"

"Leave things exactly as they are, lock up the chambers, and as you're a friend of Mr. Cardlestone's give you the key," answered Spargo, with a significant glance. "Do that, now, and let's go—I've something to do."

Once outside, with the startled charwoman gone away, Spargo turned to Breton.

"I'll tell you all I know, presently, Breton," he said. "In the meantime, I want to find out if the lodge porter saw Mr. Elphick or Mr. Cardlestone leave. I must know where they've gone—if I can only find out. I don't suppose they went on foot."

"All right," responded Breton, gloomily. "We'll go and ask. But this is all beyond me. You don't mean to say——"

"Wait a while," answered Spargo. "One thing at once," he continued, as they walked up Middle Temple Lane. "This is the first thing. You ask the porter if he's seen anything of either of them—he knows you."

The porter, duly interrogated, responded with alacrity.

"Anything of Mr. Elphick this morning, Mr. Breton?" he answered. "Certainly, sir. I got a taxi for Mr.

Elphick and Mr. Cardlestone early this morning—soon after seven. Mr. Elphick said they were going to Paris, and they'd breakfast at Charing Cross before the train left."

"Say when they'd be back?" asked Breton, with an assumption of entire carelessness.

"No, sir, Mr. Elphick didn't," answered the porter. "But I should say they wouldn't be long because they'd only got small suit-cases with them—such as they'd put a day or two's things in, sir."

"All right," said Breton. He turned away towards Spargo who had already moved off. "What next?" he asked. "Charing Cross, I suppose?"

Spargo smiled and shook his head.

"No," he answered. "I've no use for Charing Cross. They haven't gone to Paris. That was all a blind. For the present let's go back to your chambers. Then I'll talk to you."

Once within Breton's inner room, with the door closed upon them, Spargo dropped into an easy-chair and looked at the young barrister with earnest attention.

"Breton!" he said. "I believe we're coming in sight of land. You want to save your prospective father-in-law, don't you?"

"Of course!" growled Breton. "That goes without saying. But——"

"But you may have to make some sacrifices in order to do it," said Spargo. "You see——"

"Sacrifices!" exclaimed Breton. "What——"

"You may have to sacrifice some ideas—you may find

that you'll not be able to think as well of some people in the future as you have thought of them in the past. For instance—Mr. Elphick."

Breton's face grew dark.

"Speak plainly, Spargo!" he said. "It's best with me."

"Very well," replied Spargo. "Mr. Elphick, then, is in some way connected with this affair."

"You mean the—murder?"

"I mean the murder. So is Cardlestone. Of that I'm now dead certain. And that's why they're off. I startled Elphick last night. It's evident that he immediately communicated with Cardlestone, and that they made a rapid exit. Why?"

"Why? That's what I'm asking you! Why? Why? Why?"

"Because they're afraid of something coming out. And being afraid, their first instinct is to—run. They've run at the first alarm. Foolish—but instinctive."

Breton, who had flung himself into the elbow-chair at his desk, jumped to his feet and thumped his blotting-pad.

"Spargo!" he exclaimed. "Are you telling me that you accuse my guardian and his friend, Mr. Cardlestone, of being—murderers?"

"Nothing of the sort. I am accusing Mr. Elphick and Mr. Cardlestone of knowing more about the murder than they care to tell or want to tell. I am also accusing them, and especially your guardian, of knowing all about

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Maitland, alias Marbury. I made him confess last night that he knew this dead man to be John Maitland."

"You did!"

"I did. And now, Breton, since it's got to come out, we'll have the truth. Pull yourself together—get your nerves ready, for you'll have to stand a shock or two. But I know what I'm talking about—I can prove every word I'm going to say to you. And first let me ask you a few questions. Do you know anything about your parentage?"

"Nothing—beyond what Mr. Elphick has told me."

"And what was that?"

"That my parents were old friends of his, who died young, leaving me unprovided for, and that he took me up and looked after me."

"And he's never given you any documentary evidence of any sort to prove the truth of that story?"

"Never! I never questioned his statement. Why should I?"

"You never remember anything of your childhood—I mean of any person who was particularly near you in your childhood?"

"I remember the people who brought me up from the time I was three years old. And I have just a faint, shadowy recollection of some woman, a tall, dark woman, I think, before that."

"Miss Baylis," said Spargo to himself. "All right, Breton," he went on aloud. "I'm going to tell you the truth. I'll tell it to you straight out and give you all the explanations afterwards. Your real name is not Breton at all. Your real name is Maitland, and you're

the only child of the man who was found murdered at the foot of Cardlestone's staircase!"

Spargo had been wondering how Breton would take this, and he gazed at him with some anxiety as he got out the last words. What would he do?—what would he say?—what——

Breton sat down quietly at his desk and looked Spargo hard between the eyes.

"Prove that to me, Spargo," he said, in hard, matter-of-fact tones. "Prove it to me, every word. Every word, Spargo!"

Spargo nodded.

"I will—every word," he answered. "It's the right thing. Listen, then."

It was a quarter to twelve, Spargo noticed, throwing a glance at the clock outside, as he began his story; it was past one when he brought it to an end. And all that time Breton listened with the keenest attention, only asking a question now and then; now and then making a brief note on a sheet of paper which he had drawn to him.

"That's all," said Spargo at last.

"It's plenty," observed Breton laconically.

He sat staring at his notes for a moment; then he looked up at Spargo. "What do you really think?" he asked.

"About—what?" said Spargo.

"This flight of Elphick's and Cardlestone's."

"I think, as I said, that they knew something which they think may be forced upon them. I never saw a man in a greater fright than that I saw Elphick in last

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night. And it's evident that Cardlestone shares in that fright, or they wouldn't have gone off in this way together."

"Do you think they know anything of the actual murder?"

Spargo shook his head.

"I don't know. Probably. They know something. And—look here!"

Spargo put his hand in his breast pocket and drew something out which he handed to Breton, who gazed at it curiously.

"What's this?" he demanded. "Stamps?"

"That, from the description of Criedir, the stamp-dealer, is a sheet of those rare Australian stamps which Maitland had on him—carried on him. I picked it up just now in Cardlestone's room, when you were looking into his bedroom."

"But that, after all, proves nothing. Those mayn't be the identical stamps. And whether they are or not _____,"

"What are the probabilities?" interrupted Spargo sharply. "I believe that those are the stamps which Maitland—your father!—had on him, and I want to know how they came to be in Cardlestone's rooms. And I will know."

Breton handed the stamps back.

"But the general thing, Spargo?" he said. "If they didn't murder—I can't realize the thing yet!—my father——"

"If they didn't murder your father, they know who did!" exclaimed Spargo. "Now, then, it's time for

more action. Let Elphick and Cardlestone alone for the moment—they'll be tracked easily enough. I want to tackle something else for the moment. How do you get an authority from the Government to open a grave?"

"Order from the Home Secretary, which will have to be obtained by showing the very strongest reasons why it should be made."

"Good! We'll give the reasons. I want to have a grave opened."

"A grave opened! Whose grave?"

"The grave of the man Chamberlayne at Market Milcaster," replied Spargo.

Breton started.

"His? In Heaven's name, why?" he demanded.

Spargo laughed as he got up.

"Because I believe it's empty," he answered. "Because I believe that Chamberlayne is alive, and that his other name is—Cardlestone!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE PENITENT WINDOW-CLEANER

That afternoon Spargo had another of his momentous interviews with his proprietor and his editor. The first result was that all three drove to the offices of the legal gentleman who catered for the *Watchman* when it wanted any law, and that things were put in shape for an immediate application to the Home Office for permission to open the Chamberlayne grave at Market Milcaster; the second was that on the following morning there appeared in the *Watchman* a notice which set half the mouths of London a-watering. That notice, penned by Spargo, ran as follows:—

“ONE THOUSAND POUNDS REWARD.

“WHEREAS, on some date within the past twelve months, there was stolen, abstracted, or taken from the chambers in Fountain Court, Temple, occupied by Mr. Stephen Aylmore, M.P., under the name of Mr. Anderson, a walking-stick, or stout staff, of foreign make, and of curious workmanship, which stick was probably used in the murder of John Marbury, or Maitland, in Middle Temple Lane, on the night of June 21–22 last, and is now in the hands of the police:

“This is to give notice that the Proprietor of the *Watchman* newspaper will pay the above-mentioned reward (ONE THOUSAND POUNDS STERLING) at once and in cash to whosoever will prove that he or she

stole, abstracted, or took away the said stick from the said chambers, and will further give full information as to his or her disposal of the same, and the Proprietor of the *Watchman* moreover engages to treat any revelation affecting the said stick in the most strictly private and confidential manner, and to abstain from using it in any way detrimental to the informant, who should call at the *Watchman* office, and ask for Mr. Frank Spargo at any time between eleven and one o'clock midday, and seven and eleven o'clock in the evening."

"And you really expect to get some information through that?" asked Breton, who came into Spargo's room about noon on the day on which the promising announcement came out. "You really do?"

"Before today is out," said Spargo confidently. "There is more magic in a thousand-pound reward than you fancy, Breton. I'll have the history of that stick before midnight."

"How are you to tell that you won't be imposed upon?" suggested Breton. "Anybody can say that he or she stole the stick."

"Whoever comes here with any tale of a stick will have to prove to me how he or she got the stick and what was done with the stick," said Spargo. "I haven't the least doubt that that stick was stolen or taken away from Aylmore's rooms in Fountain Court, and that it got into the hands of——"

"Yes, of whom?"

"That's what I want to know in some fashion. I've

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an idea, already. But I can afford to wait for definite information. I know one thing—when I get that information—as I shall—we shall be a long way on the road towards establishing Aylmore's innocence."

Breton made no remark upon this. He was looking at Spargo with a meditative expression.

"Spargo," he said, suddenly, "do you think you'll get that order for the opening of the grave at Market Mileaster?"

"I was talking to the solicitors over the 'phone just now," answered Spargo. "They've every confidence about it. In fact, it's possible it may be made this afternoon. In that case, the opening will be made early tomorrow morning."

"Shall you go?" asked Breton.

"Certainly. And you can go with me, if you like. Better keep in touch with us all day in case we hear. You ought to be there—you're concerned."

"I should like to go—I will go," said Breton. "And if that grave proves to be—empty—I'll—I'll tell you something."

Spargo looked up with sharp instinct.

"You'll tell me something? Something? What?"

"Never mind—wait until we see if that coffin contains a dead body or lead and sawdust. If there's no body there——"

At that moment one of the senior messenger boys came in and approached Spargo. His countenance, usually subdued to an official stolidity, showed signs of something very like excitement.

"There's a man downstairs asking for you, Mr.

Spargo," he said. "He's been hanging about a bit, sir,—seems very shy about coming up. He won't say what he wants, and he won't fill up a form, sir. Says all he wants is a word or two with you."

"Bring him up at once!" commanded Spargo. He turned to Breton when the boy had gone. "There!" he said, laughing. "This is the man about the stick—you see if it isn't."

"You're such a cock-sure chap, Spargo," said Breton. "You're always going on a straight line."

"Trying to, you mean," retorted Spargo. "Well, stop here, and hear what this chap has to say: it'll no doubt be amusing."

The messenger boy, deeply conscious that he was ushering into Spargo's room an individual who might shortly carry away a thousand pounds of good *Watchman* money in his pocket, opened the door and introduced a shy and self-conscious young man, whose nervousness was painfully apparent to everybody and deeply felt by himself. He halted on the threshold, looking round the comfortably-furnished room, and at the two well-dressed young men which it framed as if he feared to enter on a scene of such grandeur.

"Come in, come in!" said Spargo, rising and pointing to an easy-chair at the side of his desk. "Take a seat. You've called about that reward, of course."

The man in the chair eyed the two of them cautiously, and not without suspicion. He cleared his throat with a palpable effort.

"Of course," he said. "It's all on the strict private Name of Edward Mollison, sir."

"And where do you live, and what do you do?" asked Spargo.

"You might put it down Rowton House, White-chapel," answered Edward Mollison. "Leastways, that's where I generally hang out when I can afford it. And—window-cleaner. Leastways, I was window cleaning when—when——"

"When you came in contact with the stick we've been advertising about," suggested Spargo. "Just so. Well, Mollison—what about the stick?"

Mollison looked round at the door, and then at the windows, and then at Breton.

"There ain't no danger of me being got into trouble along of that stick?" he asked. "'Cause if there is, I ain't a-going to say a word—no, not for no thousand pounds! Me never having been in no trouble of any sort, guv'nor—though a poor man."

"Not the slightest danger in the world, Mollison," replied Spargo. "Not the least. All you've got to do is to tell the truth—and prove that it is the truth. So it was you who took that queer-looking stick out of Mr. Aylmore's rooms in Fountain Court, was it?"

Mollison appeared to find this direct question soothing to his feelings. He smiled weakly.

"It was cert'nly me as took it, sir," he said. "Not that I meant to pinch it—not me! And, as you might say, I didn't take it, when all's said and done. It was—put on me."

"Put on you, was it?" said Spargo. "That's interesting. And how was it put on you?"

Mollison grinned again and rubbed his chin.

"It was this here way," he answered. "You see, I was working at that time—near on to nine months since, it is—for the Universal Daylight Window Cleaning Company, and I used to clean a many windows here and there in the Temple, and them windows at Mr. Aylmore's—only I knew them as Mr. Anderson's—among 'em. And I was there one morning, early it was, when the charwoman she says to me, 'I wish you'd take these two or three hearthrugs,' she says, 'and give 'em a good beating,' she says. And me being always a ready one to oblige, 'All right!' I says, and takes 'em. 'Here's something to wallop 'em with,' she says, and pulls that there old stick out of a lot that was in a stand in a corner of the lobby. And that's how I came to handle it, sir."

"I see," said Spargo. "A good explanation. And when you had beaten the hearthrugs—what then?"

Mollison smiled his weak smile again.

"Well, sir, I looked at that there stick and I see it was something uncommon," he answered. "And I thinks—'Well, this Mr. Anderson, he's got a bundle of sticks and walking canes up there—he'll never miss this old thing,' I thinks. And so I left it in a corner when I'd done beating the rugs, and when I went away with my things I took it with me."

"You took it with you?" said Spargo. "Just so. To keep as a curiosity, I suppose?"

Mollison's weak smile turned to one of cunning. He was obviously losing his nervousness; the sound of his own voice and the reception of his news was imparting confidence to him.

"Not half!" he answered. "You see, guv'nor, there

was an old cove as I knew in the Temple there as is, or was, 'cause I ain't been there since, a collector of antiques, like, and I'd sold him a queer old thing, time and again. And, of course, I had him in my eye when I took the stick away—see?"

"I see. And you took the stick to him?"

"I took it there and then," replied Mollison. "Pitched him a tale, I did, about it having been brought from foreign parts by Uncle Simon—which I never had no Uncle Simon. Made out it was a rare curiosity—which it might ha' been one, for all I know."

"Exactly. And the old cove took a fancy to it, eh?"

"Bought it there and then," answered Mollison, with something very like a wink.

"Ah! Bought it there and then. And how much did he give you for it?" asked Spargo. "Something handsome, I hope?"

"Couple o' quid," replied Mollison. "Me not wishing to part with a family heirloom for less."

"Just so. And do you happen to be able to tell me the old cove's name and his address, Mollison?" asked Spargo.

"I do, sir. Which they've painted on his entry—the fifth or sixth as you go down Middle Temple Lane," answered Mollison. "Mr. Nicholas Cardlestone, first floor up the staircase."

Spargo rose from his seat without as much as a look at Breton.

"Come this way, Mollison," he said. "We'll go and see about your little reward. Excuse me, Breton."

Breton kicked his heels in solitude for half an hour. Then Spargo came back.

"There—that's one matter settled, Breton," he said. "Now for the next. The Home Secretary's made the order for the opening of the grave at Market Milcaster. I'm going down there at once, and I suppose you're coming. And remember, if that grave's empty——"

"If that grave's empty," said Breton, "I'll tell you—a good deal."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE CONTENTS OF THE COFFIN

There travelled down together to Market Milcaster late that afternoon, Spargo, Breton, the officials from the Home Office, entrusted with the order for the opening of the Chamberlayne grave, and a solicitor acting on behalf of the proprietor of the *Watchman*. It was late in the evening when they reached the little town, but Spargo, having looked in at the parlour of the "Yellow Dragon" and ascertained that Mr. Quarterpage had only just gone home, took Breton across the street to the old gentleman's house. Mr. Quarterpage himself came to the door, and recognized Spargo immediately. Nothing would satisfy him but that the two should go in; his family, he said, had just retired, but he himself was going to take a final nightcap and a cigar, and they must share it.

"For a few minutes only then, Mr. Quarterpage," said Spargo as they followed the old man into his dining-room. "We have to be up at daybreak. And—possibly—you, too, would like to be up just as early."

Mr. Quarterpage looked an enquiry over the top of a decanter which he was handling.

"At daybreak?" he exclaimed.

"The fact is," said Spargo, "that grave of Chamberlayne's is going to be opened at daybreak. We have

managed to get an order from the Home Secretary for the exhumation of Chamberlayne's body: the officials in charge of it have come down in the same train with us; we're all staying across there at the 'Dragon.' The officials have gone to make the proper arrangements with your authorities. It will be at daybreak, or as near it as can conveniently be managed. And I suppose, now that you know of it, you'll be there?"

"God bless me!" exclaimed Mr. Quarterpage. "You've really done that! Well, well, so we shall know the truth at last, after all these years. You're a very wonderful young man, Mr. Spargo, upon my word. And this other young gentleman?"

Spargo looked at Breton, who had already given him permission to speak. "Mr. Quarterpage," he said, "this young gentleman is, without doubt, John Maitland's son. He's the young barrister, Mr. Ronald Breton, that I told you of, but there's no doubt about his parentage. And I'm sure you'll shake hands with him and wish him well."

Mr. Quarterpage set down decanter and glass and hastened to give Breton his hand.

"My dear young sir!" he exclaimed. "That I will indeed! And as to wishing you well—ah, I never wished anything but well to your poor father. He was led away, sir, led away by Chamberlayne. God bless me, what a night of surprises! Why, Mr. Spargo, supposing that coffin is found empty—what then?"

"Then," answered Spargo, "then I think we shall be able to put our hands on the man who is supposed to be in it."

"You think my father was worked upon by this man Chamberlayne, sir?" observed Breton a few minutes later when they had all sat down round Mr. Quarterpage's hospitable hearth. "You think he was unduly influenced by him?"

Mr. Quarterpage shook his head sadly.

"Chamberlayne, my dear young sir," he answered. "Chamberlayne was a plausible and a clever fellow. Nobody knew anything about him until he came to this town, and yet before he had been here very long he had contrived to ingratiate himself with everybody—of course, to his own advantage. I firmly believe that he twisted your father round his little finger. As I told Mr. Spargo there when he was making his enquiries of me a short while back, it would never have been any surprise to me to hear—definitely, I mean, young gentlemen—that all this money that was in question went into Chamberlayne's pockets. Dear me—dear me!—and you really believe that Chamberlayne is actually alive, Mr. Spargo?"

Spargo pulled out his watch. "We shall all know whether he was buried in that grave before another six hours are over, Mr. Quarterpage," he said.

He might well have spoken of four hours instead of six, for it was then nearly midnight, and before three o'clock Spargo and Breton, with the other men who had accompanied them from London were out of the "Yellow Dragon" and on their way to the cemetery just outside the little town. Over the hills to the eastward the grey dawn was slowly breaking: the long stretch of

marshland which lies between Market Milcaster and the sea was white with fog: on the cypresses and acacias of the cemetery hung veils and webs of gossamer: everything around them was quiet as the dead folk who lay beneath their feet. And the people actively concerned went quietly to work, and those who could do nothing but watch stood around in silence.

"In all my long life of over ninety years," whispered old Quarterpage, who had met them at the cemetery gates, looking fresh and brisk in spite of his shortened rest, "I have never seen this done before. It seems a strange, strange thing to interfere with a dead man's last resting-place—a dreadful thing."

"If there is a dead man there," said Spargo.

He himself was mainly curious about the details of this exhumation; he had no scruples, sentimental or otherwise, about the breaking in upon the dead. He watched all that was done. The men employed by the local authorities, instructed over-night, had fenced in the grave with canvas; the proceedings were accordingly conducted in strict privacy; a man was posted to keep away any very early passersby, who might be attracted by the unusual proceedings. At first there was nothing to do but wait, and Spargo occupied himself by reflecting that every spadeful of earth thrown out of that grave was bringing him nearer to the truth; he had an unconquerable intuition that the truth of at any rate one phase of the Marbury case was going to be revealed to them. If the coffin to which they were digging down contained a body, and that the body of the stockbroker,

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Chamberlayne, then a good deal of his, Spargo's, latest theory, would be dissolved to nothingness. But if that coffin contained no body at all, then——”

“They're down to it!” whispered Breton.

Presently they all went and looked down into the grave. The workmen had uncovered the coffin preparatory to lifting it to the surface; one of them was brushing the earth away from the name-plate. And in the now strong light they could all read the lettering on it.

JAMES CARTWRIGHT CHAMBERLAYNE

Born 1852

Died 1931

Spargo turned away as the men began to lift the coffin out of the grave.

“We shall know now!” he whispered to Breton. “And yet—what is it we shall know if——”

“If what?” said Breton. “If—what?”

But Spargo shook his head. This was one of the great moments he had lately been working for, and the issues were tremendous.

“Now for it!” said the *Watchman's* solicitor in an undertone. “Come, Mr. Spargo, now we shall see.”

They all gathered round the coffin, set on low trestles at the graveside, as the workmen silently went to work on the screws. The screws were rusted in their sockets; they grated as the men slowly worked them out. It seemed to Spargo that each man grew slower and slower in his movements; he felt that he himself was getting fidgety. Then he heard a voice of authority.

“Lift the lid off!”

A man at the head of the coffin, a man at the foot suddenly and swiftly raised the lid: the men gathered round craned their necks with a quick movement.

Sawdust!

The coffin was packed to the brim with sawdust, tightly pressed down. The surface lay smooth, undisturbed, levelled as some hand had levelled it long years before. They were not in the presence of death, but of deceit.

Somebody laughed faintly. The sound of the laughter broke the spell. The chief official present looked round him with a smile.

“It is evident that there were good grounds for suspicion,” he remarked. “Here is no dead body, gentlemen. See if anything lies beneath the sawdust,” he added, turning to the workmen. “Turn it out!”

The workmen began to scoop out the sawdust with their hands; one of them, evidently desirous of making sure that no body was in the coffin, thrust down his fingers at various places along its length. He, too, laughed.

“The coffin’s weighted with lead!” he remarked. “See!”

And tearing the sawdust aside, he showed those around him that at three intervals bars of lead had been tightly wedged into the coffin where the head, the middle, and the feet of a corpse would have rested.

“Done it cleverly,” he remarked, looking round. “You see how these weights have been adjusted. When a body’s laid out in a coffin, you know, all the weight’s in the end where the head and trunk rest. Here you see

the heaviest bar of lead is in the middle; the lightest at the feet. Clever!"

"Clear out all the sawdust," said some one. "Let's see if there's anything else."

There was something else. At the bottom of the coffin two bundles of papers, tied up with pink tape. The legal gentlemen present immediately manifested great interest in these. So did Spargo, who, pulling Breton along with him, forced his way to where the officials from the Home Office and the solicitor sent by the *Watchman* were hastily examining their discoveries.

The first bundle of papers opened evidently related to transactions at Market Milcaster: Spargo caught glimpses of names that were familiar to him, Mr. Quarterpage's amongst them. He was not at all astonished to see these things. But he was something more than astonished when, on the second parcel being opened, a quantity of papers relating to Clouthampton and the Hearth and Home Mutual Benefit Society were revealed. He gave a hasty glance at these and drew Breton aside.

"It strikes me we've found a good deal more than we ever bargained for!" he exclaimed. "Didn't Aylmore say that the real culprit at Clouthampton was another man—his clerk or something of that sort?"

"He did," agreed Breton. "He insists on it."

"Then this fellow Chamberlayne must have been the man," said Spargo. "He came to Market Milcaster from the north. What'll be done with those papers?" he asked, turning to the officials.

"We are going to seal them up at once, and take them

to London," replied the principal person in authority. "They will be quite safe, Mr. Spargo; have no fear. We don't know what they may reveal."

"You don't, indeed!" said Spargo. "But I may as well tell you that I have a strong belief that they'll reveal a good deal that nobody dreams of, so take the greatest care of them."

Then, without waiting for further talk with any one, Spargo hurried Breton out of the cemetery. At the gate, he seized him by the arm.

"Now, then, Breton!" he commanded. "Out with it!"

"With what?"

"You promised to tell me something—a great deal, you said—if we found that coffin empty. It is empty. Come on—quick!"

"All right. I believe I know where Elphick and Cardlestone can be found. That's all."

"All! It's enough. Where, then, in heaven's name?"

"Elphick has a queer little place where he and Cardlestone sometimes go fishing—right away up in one of the wildest parts of the Yorkshire moors. I expect they've gone there. Nobody knows even their names there—they could go and lie quiet there for—ages."

"Do you know the way to it?"

"I do—I've been there."

Spargo motioned him to hurry.

"Come on, then," he said. "We're going there by the very first train out of this. I know the train, too—

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we've just time to snatch a mouthful of breakfast and to send a wire to the *Watchman*, and then we'll be off. Yorkshire!—Gad, Breton, that's over three hundred miles away!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

FORESTALLED

Travelling all that long summer day, first from the south-west of England to the Midlands, then from the Midlands to the north, Spargo and Breton came late at night to Hawes' Junction, on the border of Yorkshire and Westmoreland, and saw rising all around them in the half-darkness the mighty bulks of the great fells which rise amongst that wild and lonely stretch of land. At that hour of the night and amidst that weird silence, broken only by the murmur of some adjacent waterfall the scene was impressive and suggestive; it seemed to Spargo as if London were a million miles away, and the rush and bustle of human life a thing of another planet. Here and there in the valleys he saw a light, but such lights were few and far between; even as he looked some of them twinkled and went out. It was evident that he and Breton were presently to be alone with the night.

"How far?" he asked Breton as they walked away from the station.

"We'd better discuss matters," answered Breton. "The place is in a narrow valley called Fossdale, some six or seven miles away across these fells, and as wild a walk as any lover of such things could wish for. It's half-past nine now, Spargo: I reckon it will take us a

good two and a half hours, if not more, to do it. Now, the question is—Do we go straight there, or do we put up for the night? There's an inn here at this junction; there's the Moor Cock Inn a mile or so along the road which we must take before we turn off to the moorland and the fells. It's going to be a black night—look at those masses of black cloud gathering there!—and possibly a wet one, and we've no waterproofs. But it's for you to say—I'm game for whatever you like."

"Do you know the way?" asked Spargo.

"I've been the way. In the daytime I could go straight ahead. I remember all the landmarks. Even in the darkness I believe I can find my way. But it's rough walking."

"We'll go straight there," said Spargo. "Every minute's precious. But—can we get a mouthful of bread and cheese and a glass of ale first?"

"Good idea! We'll call in at the 'Moor Cock.' Now then, while we're on this firm road, step it out lively."

The "Moor Cock" was almost deserted at that hour: there was scarcely a soul in it when the two travellers turned in to its dimly-lighted parlour. The landlord, bringing the desired refreshment, looked hard at Breton.

"Come our way again then, sir?" he remarked with a sudden grin of recognition.

"Ah, you remember me?" said Breton.

"I call in mind when you came here with the two old gents last year," replied the landlord. "I hear they're here again—Tom Summers was coming across that way this morning, and said he'd seen 'em at the little cottage. Going to join 'em, I reckon, sir?"

Breton kicked Spargo under the table.

"Yes, we're going to have a day or two with them," he answered. "Just to get a breath of your moorland air."

"Well, you'll have a roughish walk over there tonight, gentlemen," said the landlord. "There's going to be a storm. And it's a stiffish way to make out at this time o'night."

"Oh, we'll manage," said Breton, nonchalantly. "I know the way, and we're not afraid of a wet skin."

The landlord laughed, and sitting down on his long settle folded his arms and scratched his elbows.

"There was a gentleman—London gentleman by his tongue—came in here this afternoon, and asked the way to Fossdale," he observed. "He'll be there long since—he'd have daylight for his walk. Happen he's one of your party?—he asked where the old gentlemen's little cottage was."

Again Spargo felt his shin kicked and made no sign.

"One of their friends, perhaps," answered Breton. "What was he like?"

The landlord ruminated. He was not good at description and was conscious of the fact.

"Well, a darkish, serious-faced gentleman," he said. "Stranger hereabouts, at all events. Wore a grey suit—something like your friend's there. Yes—he took some bread and cheese with him when he heard what a long way it was."

"Wise man," remarked Breton. He hastily finished his own bread and cheese, and drank off the rest of his pint of ale. "Come on," he said, "let's be stepping."

Outside, in the almost tangible darkness, Breton clutched Spargo's arm. "Who's the man?" he said. "Can you think, Spargo?"

"Can't," answered Spargo. "I was trying to, while that chap was talking. But—it's somebody that's got in before us. Not Rathbury, anyhow—he's not serious-faced. Heavens, Breton, however are you going to find your way in this darkness?"

"You'll see presently. We follow the road a little. Then we turn up the fell side there. On the top, if the night clears a bit, we ought to see Great Shunnor Fell and Lovely Seat—they're both well over two thousand feet, and they stand up well. We want to make for a point clear between them. But I warn you, Spargo, it's stiff going!"

"Go ahead!" said Spargo. "It's the first time in my life I ever did anything of this sort, but we're going on if it takes us all night. I couldn't sleep in any bed now that I've heard there's somebody ahead of us. Go first, old chap, and I'll follow."

Breton went steadily forward along the road. That was easy work, but when he turned off and began to thread his way up the fell-side by what was obviously no more than a sheep-track, Spargo's troubles began. It seemed to him that he was walking as in a nightmare; all that he saw was magnified and heightened; the darkening sky above; the faint outlines of the towering hills; the gaunt spectres of fir and pine; the figure of Breton forging stolidly and surely ahead. Now the ground was soft and spongy under his feet; now it was stony and rugged; more than once he caught an ankle in the wire-

like heather and tripped, bruising his knees. And in the end he resigned himself to keeping his eye on Breton, outlined against the sky, and following doggedly in his footsteps.

"Was there no other way than this?" he asked after a long interval of silence. "Do you mean to say those two—Elphick and Cardlestone—would take this way?"

"There is another way—down the valley, by Thwaite Bridge and Hardraw," answered Breton, "but it's miles and miles round. This is a straight cut across country, and in daylight it's a delightful walk. But at night—Gad!—here's the rain, Spargo!"

The rain came down as it does in that part of the world, with a suddenness that was as fierce as it was heavy. The whole of the grey night was blotted out; Spargo was only conscious that he stood in a vast solitude and was being gradually drowned. But Breton, whose sight was keener, and who had more knowledge of the situation dragged his companion into the shelter of a group of rocks. He laughed a little as they huddled closely together.

"This is a different sort of thing to pursuing detective work in Fleet Street, Spargo," he said. "You would come on, you know."

"I'm going on if we go through cataracts and floods," answered Spargo. "I might have been induced to stop at the 'Moor Cock' overnight if we hadn't heard of that chap in front. If he's after those two he's somebody who knows something. What I can't make out is—who he can be."

"Nor I," said Breton. "I can't think of anybody

who knows of this retreat. But—has it ever struck you, Spargo, that somebody beside yourself may have been investigating?”

“Possible,” replied Spargo. “One never knows. I only wish we’d been a few hours earlier. For I wanted to have the first word with those two.”

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had come. Just as suddenly the heavens cleared. And going forward to the top of the ridge which they were then crossing, Breton pointed an arm to something shining far away below them.

“You see that?” he said. “That’s a sheet of water lying between us and Cotterdale. We leave that on our right hand, climb the fell beyond it, drop down into Cotterdale, cross two more ranges of fell, and come down into Fossdale under Lovely Seat. There’s a good two hours and a half stiff pull yet, Spargo. Think you can stick it?”

Spargo set his teeth.

“Go on!” he said.

Up hill, down dale, now up to his ankles in peaty ground, now tearing his shins, now bruising his knees, Spargo, yearning for the London lights, the well-paved London streets, the convenient taxi-cab, even the humble omnibus, plodded forward after his guide. It seemed to him that they had walked for ages and had traversed a whole continent of mountains and valley when at last Breton, halting on the summit of a wind-swept ridge, laid one hand on his companion’s shoulder and pointed downward with the other.

“There!” he said. “There!”

Spargo looked ahead into the night. Far away, at what seemed to him to be a considerable distance, he saw the faint, very faint glimmer of a light—a mere spark of a light.

“That’s the cottage,” said Breton. “Late as it is, you see, they’re up. And here’s the roughest bit of the journey. It’ll take me all my time to find the track across this moor, Spargo, so step carefully after me—there are bogs and holes hereabouts.”

Another hour had gone by ere the two came to the cottage. Sometimes the guiding light had vanished, blotted out by intervening rises in the ground; always, when they saw it again, they were slowly drawing nearer to it. And now when they were at last close to it, Spargo realized that he found himself in one of the loneliest places he had ever been capable of imagining—so lonely and desolate a spot he had certainly never seen. In the dim light he could see a narrow, crawling stream, making its way down over rocks and stones from the high ground of Great Shunnor Fell. Opposite to the place at which they stood, on the edge of the moorland, a horse-shoe like formation of ground was backed by a ring of fir and pine; beneath this protecting fringe of trees stood a small building of grey stone which looked as if it had been originally built by some shepherd as a pen for the moorland sheep. It was of no more than one storey in height, but of some length; a considerable part of it was hidden by shrubs and brushwood. And from one uncurtained, blindless window the light of a lamp shone boldly into the fading darkness without.

Breton pulled up on the edge of the crawling stream.

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"We've got to get across there, Spargo," he said. "But as we're already soaked to the knee it doesn't matter about getting another wetting. Have you any idea how long we've been walking?"

"Hours—days—years!" replied Spargo.

"I should say quite four hours," said Breton. "In that case, it's well past two o'clock, and the light will be breaking in another hour or so. Now, once across this stream, what shall we do?"

"What have we come to do? Go to the cottage, of course!"

"Wait a bit. No need to startle them. By the fact they've got a light, I take it that they're up. Look there!"

As he spoke, a figure crossed the window passing between it and the light.

"That's not Elphick, nor yet Cardlestone," said Spargo. "They're medium-heighted men. That's a tallish man."

"Then it's the man the landlord of the 'Moor Cock' told us about," said Breton. "Now, look here—I know every inch of this place. When we're across let me go up to the cottage, and I'll take an observation through that window and see who's inside. Come on."

He led Spargo across the stream at a place where a succession of boulders made a natural bridge, and bidding him keep quiet, went up the bank to the cottage. Spargo, watching him, saw him make his way past the shrubs and undergrowth until he came to a great bush which stood between the lighted window and the projecting porch of the cottage. He lingered in the shadow

of this bush but for a short moment; then came swiftly and noiselessly back to his companion. His hand fell on Spargo's arm with a clutch of nervous excitement.

"Spargo!" he whispered. "Who on earth do you think the other man is?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE WHIP HAND

Spargo, almost irritable from desire to get at close grips with the objects of his long journey, shook off Breton's hand with a growl of resentment.

"And how on earth can I waste time guessing?" he exclaimed. "Who is he?"

Breton laughed softly.

"Steady, Spargo, steady!" he said. "It's Myerst—the Safe Deposit man. Myerst!"

Spargo started as if something had bitten him.

"Myerst!" he almost shouted. "Myerst! Good Lord!—why did I never think of him? Myerst! Then——"

"I don't know why you should have thought of him," said Breton. "But—he's there."

Spargo took a step towards the cottage; Breton pulled him back.

"Wait!" he said. "We've got to discuss this. I'd better tell you what they're doing."

"What are they doing, then?" demanded Spargo impatiently.

"Well," answered Breton. "They're going through a quantity of papers. The two old gentlemen look very ill and very miserable. Myerst is evidently laying down

the law to them in some fashion or other. I've formed a notion, Spargo."

"What notion?"

"Myerst is in possession of whatever secret they have, and he's followed them down here to blackmail them. That's my notion."

Spargo thought awhile, pacing up and down the river bank.

"I daresay you're right," he said. "Now, what's to be done?"

Breton, too, considered matters.

"I wish," he said at last, "I wish we could get in there and overhear what's going on. But that's impossible—I know that cottage. The only thing we can do is this—we must catch Myerst unawares. He's here for no good. Look here!"

And reaching round to his hip-pocket Breton drew out a Browning revolver and wagged it in his hand with a smile.

"That's a useful thing to have, Spargo," he remarked. "I slipped it into my pocket the other day, wondering why on earth I did it. Now it'll come in handy. For anything we know Myerst may be armed."

"Well?" said Spargo.

"Come up to the cottage. If things turn out as I think they will, Myerst, when he's got what he wants, will be off. Now, you shall get where I did just now, behind that bush, and I'll station myself in the doorway. You can report to me, and when Myerst comes out I'll cover him. Come on, Spargo; it's beginning to get light already."

Breton cautiously led the way along the river bank, making use of such cover as the willows and alders afforded. Together, he and Spargo made their way to the front of the cottage. Arrived at the door, Breton posted himself in the porch, motioning to Spargo to creep in behind the bushes and to look through the window. And Spargo noiselessly followed his directions and slightly parting the branches which concealed him looked in through the uncurtained glass.

The interior into which he looked was rough and comfortless in the extreme. There were the bare accessories of a moorland cottage; rough chairs and tables, plastered walls, a fishing rod or two piled in a corner; some food set out on a side table. At the table in the middle of the floor the three men sat. Cardlestone's face was in the shadow; Myerst had his back to the window; old Elphick bending over the table was laboriously writing with shaking fingers. And Spargo twisted his head round to his companion.

"Elphick," he said, "is writing a cheque. Myerst has another cheque in his hand. Be ready!—when he gets that second cheque I guess he'll be off."

Breton smiled grimly and nodded. A moment later Spargo whispered again.

"Look out, Breton! He's coming."

Breton drew back into the angle of the porch; Spargo quitted his protecting bush and took the other angle. The door opened. And they heard Myerst's voice, threatening, commanding in tone.

"Now, remember all I've said! And don't you for-

get—I've the whip hand of both of you—the whip hand!"

Then Myerst turned and stepped out into the grey light—to find himself confronted by an athletic young man who held the muzzle of an ugly revolver within two inches of the bridge of his nose and in a remarkably firm and steady grip. Another glance showed him the figure of a second business-like looking young man at his side, whose attitude showed a desire to grapple with him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Myerst," said Breton with cold and ironic politeness. "We are glad to meet you so unexpectedly. And—I must trouble you to put up your hands. Quick!"

Myerst made one hurried movement of his right hand towards his hip, but a sudden growl from Breton made him shift it just as quickly above his head, whither the left followed it. Breton laughed softly.

"That's wise, Mr. Myerst," he said, keeping his revolver steadily pointed at his prisoner's nose. "Discretion will certainly be the better part of your valour on this occasion. Spargo—may I trouble you to see what Mr. Myerst carries in his pockets? Go through them carefully. Not for papers or documents—just now. We can leave that matter—we've plenty of time. See if he's got a weapon of any sort on him, Spargo—that's the important thing."

Considering that Spargo had never gone through the experience of searching a man before, he made sharp and creditable work of seeing what the prisoner carried.

And he forthwith drew out and exhibited a revolver, while Myerst, finding his tongue, cursed them both, heartily and with profusion.

"Excellent!" said Breton, laughing again. "Sure he's got nothing else on him that's dangerous, Spargo? All right. Now, Mr. Myerst, right about face! Walk into the cottage, hands up, and remember there are two revolvers behind your back. March!"

Myerst obeyed this peremptory order with more curses. The three walked into the cottage. Breton kept his eye on his captive; Spargo gave a glance at the two old men. Cardlestone, white and shaking, was lying back in his chair; Elphick, scarcely less alarmed, had risen, and was coming forward with trembling limbs.

"Wait a moment," said Breton, soothingly. "Don't alarm yourself. We'll deal with Mr. Myerst here first. Now, Myerst, my man, sit down in that chair—it's the heaviest the place affords.' Into it, now! Spargo, you see that coil of rope there. Tie Myerst up—hand and foot—to that chair. And tie him well. All the knots to be double, Spargo, and behind him."

Myerst suddenly laughed.

"You damned young bully!" he exclaimed. "If you put a rope round me, you're only putting ropes round the necks of these two old villains. Mark that, my fine fellows!"

"We'll see about that later," answered Breton. He kept Myerst covered while Spargo made play with the rope. "Don't be afraid of hurting him, Spargo," he said. "Tie him well and strong. He won't shift that chair in a hurry."

Spargo spliced his man to the chair in a fashion that would have done credit to a sailor. He left Myers, literally unable to move either hand or foot, and Myerst cursed him from crown to heel for his pains. "That'll do," said Breton at last. He dropped his revolver into his pocket and turned to the two old men. Elphick averted his eyes and sank into a chair in the darkest corner of the room: old Cardlestone shook as with palsy and muttered words which the two young men could not catch. "Guardian," continued Breton, "don't be frightened! And don't you be frightened, either, Mr. Cardlestone. There's nothing to be afraid of, just yet, whatever there may be later on. It seems to me that Mr. Spargo and I came just in time. Now, guardian, what was this fellow after?"

Old Elphick lifted his head and shook it; he was plainly on the verge of tears; as for Cardlestone, it was evident that his nerve was completely gone. And Breton pointed Spargo to an old corner cupboard.

"Spargo," he said, "I'm pretty sure you'll find whisky in there. Give them both a stiff dose: they've broken up. Now, guardian," he continued, when Spargo had carried out this order, "what was he after? Shall I suggest it? Was it—blackmail?"

Cardlestone began to whimper; Elphick nodded his head. "Yes, yes!" he muttered. "Blackmail! That was it—blackmail. He—he got money—papers—from us. They're on him."

Breton turned on the captive with a look of contempt.

"I thought as much, Mr. Myerst," he said. "Spargo, let's see what he has on him."

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Spargo began to search the prisoner's pockets. He laid out everything on the table as he found it. It was plain that Myerst had contemplated some sort of flight or a long, long journey. There was a quantity of loose gold; a number of bank-notes of the more easily negotiated denominations; various foreign securities, realizable in Paris. And there was an open cheque, signed by Cardlestone for ten thousand pounds, and another, with Elphick's name at the foot, also open, for half that amount. Breton examined all these matters as Spargo handed them out. He turned to old Elphick.

"Guardian," he said, "why have you or Mr. Cardlestone given this man these cheques and securities? What hold has he on you?"

Old Cardlestone began to whimper afresh; Elphick turned a troubled face on his ward.

"He—he threatened to accuse us of the murder of Marbury!" he faltered. "We—we didn't see that we had a chance."

"What does he know of the murder of Marbury and of you in connection with it?" demanded Breton. "Come—tell me the truth now."

"He's been investigating—so he says," answered Elphick. "He lives in that house in Middle Temple Lane, you know, in the top-floor rooms above Cardlestone's. And—and he says he's the fullest evidence against Cardlestone—and against me as an accessory after the fact."

"And—it's a lie?" asked Breton.

"A lie!" answered Elphick. "Of course, it's a lie. But—he's so clever that—that——"

"That you don't know how you could prove it otherwise," said Breton. "Ah! And so this fellow lives over Mr. Cardlestone there, does he? That may account for a good many things. Now we must have the police here." He sat down at the table and drew the writing materials to him. "Look here, Spargo," he continued. "I'm going to write a note to the superintendent of police at Hawes—there's a farm half a mile from here where I can get a man to ride down to Hawes with the note. Now, if you want to send a wire to the *Watchman*, draft it out, and he'll take it with him."

Elphick began to move in his corner.

"Must the police come?" he said. "Must——"

"The police must come," answered Breton firmly. "Go ahead with your wire, Spargo, while I write this note."

Three quarters of an hour later, when Breton came back from the farm, he sat down at Elphick's side and laid his hand on the old man's.

"Now, guardian," he said, quietly, "you've got to tell us the truth."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

MYERST EXPLAINS

It had been apparent to Spargo, from the moment of his entering the cottage, that the two old men were suffering badly from shock and fright: Cardlestone still sat in his corner shivering and trembling; he looked incapable of explaining anything; Elphick was scarcely more fitted to speak. And when Breton issued his peremptory invitation to his guardian to tell the truth, Spargo intervened.

"Far better leave him alone, Breton," he said in a low voice. "Don't you see the old chap's done up? They're both done up. We don't know what they've gone through with this fellow before we came, and it's certain they've had no sleep. Leave it all till later—after all, we've found them and we've found him." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder in Myerst's direction, and Breton involuntarily followed the movement. He caught the prisoner's eye, and Myerst laughed.

"I daresay you two young men think yourselves very clever," he said sneeringly. "Don't you, now?"

"We've been clever enough to catch you, anyway," retorted Breton. "And now we've got you we'll keep you till the police can relieve us of you."

"Oh!" said Myerst, with another sneering laugh.

“And on what charge do you propose to hand me over to the police? It strikes me you’ll have some difficulty in formulating one, Mr. Breton.”

“We’ll see about that later,” said Breton. “You’ve extorted money by menaces from these gentlemen, at any rate.”

“Have I? How do you know they didn’t entrust me with these cheques as their agent?” exclaimed Myerst. “Answer me that! Or, rather, let them answer if they dare. Here you, Cardlestone, you Elphick—didn’t you give me these cheques as your agent? Speak up now, and quick!”

Spargo, watching the two old men, saw them both quiver at the sound of Myerst’s voice; Cardlestone indeed, began to whimper softly.

“Look here, Breton,” he said, whispering, “this scoundrel’s got some hold on these two old chaps—they’re frightened to death of him. Leave them alone: it would be best for them if they could get some rest. Hold your tongue, you!” he added aloud, turning to Myerst. “When we want you to speak we’ll tell you.”

But Myerst laughed again.

“All very high and mighty, Mr. Spargo of the *Watchman*!” he sneered. “You’re another of the cock-sure lot. And you’re very clever, but not clever enough. Now, look here! Supposing——”

Spargo turned his back on him. He went over to old Cardlestone and felt his hands. And he turned to Breton with a look of concern.

“I say!” he exclaimed. “He’s more than frightened—he’s ill! What’s to be done?”

"I asked the police to bring a doctor along with them," answered Breton. "In the meantime, let's put him to bed—there are beds in that inner room. We'll get him to bed and give him something hot to drink—that's all I can think of for the present."

Between them they managed to get Cardlestone to his bed, and Spargo, with a happy thought, boiled water on the rusty stove and put hot bottles to his feet. When that was done they persuaded Elphick to lie down in the inner room. Presently both old men fell asleep, and then Breton and Spargo suddenly realized that they themselves were hungry and wet and weary.

"There ought to be food in the cupboard," said Breton, beginning to rummage. "They've generally had a good stock of tinned things. Here we are, Spargo—these are tongues and sardines. Make some hot coffee while I open one of these tins."

The prisoner watched the preparations for a rough and ready breakfast with eyes that eventually began to glisten.

"I may remind you that I'm hungry, too," he said as Spargo set the coffee on the table. "And you've no right to starve me, even if you've the physical ability to keep me tied up. Give me something to eat, if you please."

"You shan't starve," said Breton, carelessly. He cut an ample supply of bread and meat, filled a cup with coffee and placed cup and plate before Myerst. "Untie his right arm, Spargo," he continued. "I think we can give him that liberty. We've got his revolver, anyhow."

For a while the three men ate and drank in silence. At last Myerst pushed his plate away. He looked scrutinizingly at his two captors. "Look here!" he said. "You think you know a lot about all this affair, Spargo, but there's only one person who knows all about it. That's me!"

"We're taking that for granted," said Spargo. "We guessed as much when we found you here. You'll have ample opportunity for explanation, you know, later on."

"I'll explain now, if you care to hear," said Myerst with another of his cynical laughs. "And if I do, I'll tell you the truth. I know you've got an idea in your heads that isn't favourable to me, but you're utterly wrong, whatever you may think. Look here!—I'll make you a fair offer. There are some cigars in my case there—give me one, and mix me a drink of that whisky—a good 'un—and I'll tell you what I know about this matter. Come on!—anything's better than sitting here doing nothing."

The two young men looked at each other. Then Breton nodded. "Let him talk if he likes," he said. "We're not bound to believe him. And we may hear something that's true. Give him his cigar and his drink."

Myerst took a stiff pull at the contents of the tumbler which Spargo presently set before him. He laughed as he inhaled the first fumes of his cigar.

"As it happens, you'll hear nothing but the truth," he observed. "Now that things are as they are, there's no reason why I shouldn't tell the truth. The fact is, I've nothing to fear. You can't give me in charge, for it so happens that I've got a power of attorney from

these two old chaps inside there to act for them in regard to the money they entrusted me with. It's in an inside pocket of that letter-case, and if you look at it, Breton, you'll see it's in order. I'm not even going to dare you to interfere with or destroy it—you're a barrister, and you'll respect the law. But that's a fact—and if anybody's got a case against anybody, I have against you two for assault and illegal detention. But I'm not a vindictive man, and——"

Breton took up Myerst's letter-case and examined its contents. And presently he turned to Spargo.

"He's right!" he whispered. "This is quite in order." He turned to Myerst. "All the same," he said, addressing him, "we shan't release you, because we believe you're concerned in the murder of John Marbury. We're justified in holding you on that account."

"All right, my young friend," said Myerst. "I have your own stupid way. But I said I'd tell you the plain truth. Well, the plain truth is that I know no more of the absolute murder of your father than I know of what is going on in Timbuctoo at this moment! I do not know who killed John Maitland. That's a fact! It may have been the old man in there who's already at his own last gasp, or it mayn't. I tell you I don't know—though, like you, Spargo, I've tried hard to find out. That's the truth—I do not know."

"You expect us to believe that?" exclaimed Breton incredulously.

"Believe it or not, as you like—it's the truth," answered Myerst. "Now, look here—I said nobody knew as much of this affair as I know, and that's true also.

And here's the truth of what I know. The old man in that room, whom you know as Nicholas Cardlestone, is in reality Chamberlayne, the stockbroker, of Market Milcaster, whose name was so freely mentioned when your father was tried there. That's another fact!"

"How," asked Breton, sternly, "can you prove it? How do you know it?"

"Because," replied Myerst, with a cunning grin, "I helped to carry out his mock death and burial—I was a solicitor in those days, and my name was—something else. There were three of us at it: Chamberlayne's nephew; a doctor of no reputation; and myself. We carried it out very cleverly, and Chamberlayne gave us five thousand pounds apiece for our trouble. It was not the first time that I had helped him and been well paid for my help. The first time was in connection with the Clouthampton Hearth and Home Mutual Benefit Society affair—Aylmore, or Ainsworth, was as innocent as a child in that!—Chamberlayne was the man at the back. But, unfortunately, Chamberlayne didn't profit—he lost all he got by it, pretty quick. That was why he transferred his abilities to Market Milcaster."

"You can prove all this, I suppose?" remarked Spargo.

"Every word—every letter! But about the Market Milcaster affair: Your father, Breton, was right in what he said about Chamberlayne having all the money that was got from the bank. He had—and he engineered that mock death and funeral so that he could disappear, and he paid us who helped him generously, as I've told you. The thing couldn't have been better

done. When it was done, the nephew disappeared; the doctor disappeared; Chamberlayne disappeared. I had bad luck—to tell you the truth, I was struck off the rolls for a technical offence. So I changed my name and became Mr. Myerst, and eventually what I am now. And it was not until three years ago that I found Chamberlayne. I found him in this way: After I became secretary to the Safe Deposit Company, I took chambers in the Temple, above Cardlestone's. And I speedily found out who he was. Instead of going abroad, the old fox—though he was a comparatively young 'un, then!—had shaved off his beard, settled down in the Temple and given himself up to his two hobbies, collecting curiosities and stamps. There he'd lived quietly all these years, and nobody had ever recognized or suspected him. Indeed, I don't see how they could; he lived such a quiet, secluded life, with his collections, his old port, and his little whims and fads. But—I knew him!"

"And you doubtless profited by your recognition," suggested Breton.

"I certainly did. He was glad to pay me a nice sum every quarter to hold my tongue," replied Myerst, "and I was glad to take it and, naturally, I gained a considerable knowledge of him. He had only one friend—Mr. Elphick, in there. Now, I'll tell you about him."

"Only if you are going to speak respectfully of him," said Breton sternly.

"I've no reason to do otherwise. Elphick is the man who ought to have married your mother. When things turned out as they did, Elphick took you and brought

you up as he has done, so that you should never know of your father's disgrace. Elphick never knew until last night that Cardlestone is Chamberlayne. Even the biggest scoundrels have friends—Elphick's very fond of Cardlestone. He——”

Spargo turned sharply on Myerst.

“You say Elphick didn't know until last night!” he exclaimed. “Why, then, this running away? What were they running from?”

“I have no more notion than you have, Spargo,” replied Myerst. “I tell you one or other of them knows something that I don't. Elphick, I gather, took fright from you, and went to Cardlestone—then they both vanished. It may be that Cardlestone did kill Maitland—I don't know. But I'll tell you what I know about the actual murder—for I do know a good deal about it, though, as I say, I don't know who killed Maitland. Now, first, you know all that about Maitland's having papers and valuables and gold on him? Very well—I've got all that. The whole lot is locked up—safely—and I'm willing to hand it over to you, Breton, when we go back to town, and the necessary proof is given—as it will be—that you're Maitland's son.”

Myerst paused to see the effect of this announcement, and laughed when he saw the blank astonishment which stole over his hearers' faces.

“And still more,” he continued, “I've got all the contents of that leather box which Maitland deposited with me—that's safely locked up, too, and at your disposal. I took possession of that the day after the murder. Then, for purposes of my own, I went to Scotland

Yard, as Spargo there is aware. You see, I was playing a game—and it required some ingenuity.”

“A game!” exclaimed Breton. “Good heavens—what game?”

“I never knew until I had possession of all these things that Marbury was Maitland of Market Milcaster,” answered Myerst. “When I did know then I began to put things together and to pursue my own line, independent of everybody. I tell you I had all Maitland’s papers and possessions, by that time—except one thing. That packet of Australian stamps. And—I found out that those stamps were in the hands of—Cardlestone!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE FINAL TELEGRAM

Myerst paused, to take a pull at his glass, and to look at the two amazed listeners with a smile of conscious triumph.

"In the hands of Cardlestone," he repeated. "Now, what did I argue from that? Why, of course, that Maitland had been to Cardlestone's rooms that night. Wasn't he found lying dead at the foot of Cardlestone's stairs? Aye—but who found him? Not the porter—not the police—not you, Master Spargo, with all your cleverness. The man who found Maitland lying dead there that night was—I!"

In the silence that followed, Spargo, who had been making notes of what Myerst said, suddenly dropped his pencil and thrusting his hands in his pockets sat bolt upright with a look which Breton, who was watching him seriously, could not make out. It was the look of a man whose ideas and conceptions are being rudely upset. And Myerst, too, saw it and he laughed, more sneeringly than ever.

"That's one for you, Spargo!" he said. "That surprises you—that makes you think. Now what do you think?—if one may ask."

"I think," said Spargo, "that you are either a con-

summate liar, or that this mystery is bigger than before."

"I can lie when it's necessary," retorted Myerst. "Just now it isn't necessary. I'm telling you the plain truth: there's no reason why I shouldn't. As I've said before, although you two young bullies have tied me up in this fashion, you can't do anything against me. I've a power of attorney from those two old men in there, and that's enough to satisfy anybody as to my possession of their cheques and securities. I've the whip hand of you, my sons, in all ways. And that's why I'm telling you the truth—to amuse myself during this period of waiting. The plain truth, my sons!"

"In pursuance of which," observed Breton, drily, "I think you mentioned that you were the first person to find my father lying dead?"

"I was. That is—as far as I can gather. I'll tell you all about it. As I said, I live over Cardlestone. That night I came home very late—it was well past one o'clock. There was nobody about—as a matter of fact, no one has residential chambers in that building but Cardlestone and myself. I found the body of a man lying in the entry. I struck a match and immediately recognized my visitor of the afternoon—John Marbury. Now, although I was so late in going home, I was as sober as a man can be, and I think pretty quickly at all times. I thought at double extra speed just then. And the first thing I did was to strip the body of every article it had on it—money, papers, everything. All these things are safely locked up—they've never been tracked. Next day, using my facilities as secretary to the Safe Deposit

Company, I secured the things in that box. Then I found out who the dead man really was. And then I deliberately set to work to throw dust in the eyes of the police and of the newspapers, and particularly in the eyes of young Master Spargo there. I had an object."

"What?" asked Breton.

"What! Knowing all I did, I firmly believed that Marbury, or, rather, Maitland, had been murdered by either Cardlestone or Elphick. I put it to myself in this way, and my opinion was strengthened as you, Spargo, inserted news in your paper—Maitland, finding himself in the vicinity of Cardlestone after leaving Aylmore's rooms that night, turned into our building, perhaps just to see where Cardlestone lived. He met Cardlestone accidentally, or he perhaps met Cardlestone and Elphick together—they recognized each other. Maitland probably threatened to expose Cardlestone, or, rather, Chamberlayne—nobody, of course, could know what happened, but my theory was that Chamberlayne killed him. There, at any rate, was the fact that Maitland was found murdered at Chamberlayne's very threshold. And, in the course of a few days, I proved, to my own positive satisfaction, by getting access to Chamberlayne's rooms in his absence that Maitland had been there, had been in those rooms. For I found there, in Chamberlayne's desk, the rare Australian stamps of which Criedir told at the inquest. That was proof positive."

Spargo looked at Breton. They knew what Myerst did not know—that the stamps of which he spoke were lying in Spargo's breast pocket, where they had lain

since he had picked them up from the litter and confusion of Chamberlayne's floor.

"Why," asked Breton, after a pause, "why did you never accuse Cardlestone, or Chamberlayne, of the murder?"

"I did! I have accused him a score of times—and Elphick, too," replied Myerst with emphasis. "Not at first, mind you—I never let Chamberlayne know that I ever suspected him for some time. I had my own game to play. But at last—not so many days ago—I did. I accused them both. That's how I got the whip hand of them. They began to be afraid—by that time Elphick had got to know all about Cardlestone's past as Chamberlayne. And as I tell you, Elphick's fond of Cardlestone. It's queer, but he is. He—wants to shield him."

"What did they say when you accused them?" asked Breton. "Let's keep to that point—never mind their feelings for one another."

"Just so, but that feeling's a lot more to do with this mystery than you think, my young friend," said Myerst. "What did they say, you ask? Why, they strenuously denied it. Cardlestone swore solemnly to me that he had no part or lot in the murder of Maitland. So did Elphick. But—they know something about the murder. If those two old men can't tell you definitely who actually struck John Maitland down, I'm certain that they have a very clear idea in their minds as to who really did! They——"

A sudden sharp cry from the inner room interrupted

Myerst. Breton and Spargo started to their feet and made for the door. But before they could reach it Elphick came out, white and shaking.

"He's gone!" he exclaimed in quavering accents. "My old friend's gone—he's dead! I was—asleep. I woke suddenly and looked at him. He——"

Spargo forced the old man into a chair and gave him some whisky; Breton passed quickly into the inner room; only to come back shaking his head.

"He's dead," he said. "He evidently died in his sleep."

"Then his secret's gone with him," remarked Myerst, calmly. "And now we shall never know if he did kill John Maitland or if he didn't. So that's done with!"

Old Elphick suddenly sat up in his chair, pushing Spargo fiercely away from his side.

"He didn't kill John Maitland!" he cried angrily, attempting to shake his fist at Myerst. "Whoever says he killed Maitland lies. He was as innocent as I am. You've tortured and tormented him to his death with that charge, as you're torturing me—among you. I tell you he'd nothing to do with John Maitland's death—nothing!"

Myerst laughed.

"Who had, then?" he said.

"Hold your tongue!" commanded Breton, turning angrily on him. He sat down by Elphick's side and laid his hand soothingly on the old man's arm.

"Guardian," he said, "why don't you tell what you know? Don't be afraid of that fellow there—he's safe

enough. Tell Spargo and me what you know of the matter. Remember, nothing can hurt Cardlestone, or Chamberlayne, or whoever he is or was, now."

Elphick sat for a moment shaking his head. He allowed Spargo to give him another drink; he lifted his head and looked at the two young men with something of an appeal.

"I'm badly shaken," he said. "I've suffered much lately—I've learnt things that I didn't know. Perhaps I ought to have spoken before, but I was afraid for—for him. He was a good friend, Cardlestone, whatever else he may have been—a good friend. And—I don't know any more than what happened that night."

"Tell us what happened that night," said Breton.

"Well, that night I went round, as I often did, to play piquet with Cardlestone. That was about ten o'clock. About eleven Jane Baylis came to Cardlestone's—she'd been to my rooms to find me—wanted to see me particularly—and she'd come on there, knowing where I should be. Cardlestone would make her have a glass of wine and a biscuit; she sat down and we all talked. Then, about, I should think, a quarter to twelve, a knock came at Cardlestone's door—his outer door was open, and of course anybody outside could see lights within. Cardlestone went to the door: we heard a man's voice enquire for him by name; then the voice added that Criedir, the stamp dealer, had advised him to call on Mr. Cardlestone to show him some rare Australian stamps, and that seeing a light under his door he had knocked. Cardlestone asked him in—he came in. That was the man we saw next day at the mortuary. Upon

my honour, we didn't know him, either that night or next day!"

"What happened when he came in?" asked Breton.

"Cardlestone asked him to sit down: he offered and gave him a drink. The man said Criedir had given him Cardlestone's address, and that he'd been with a friend at some rooms in Fountain Court, and as he was passing our building he'd just looked to make sure where Cardlestone lived, and as he'd noticed a light he'd made bold to knock. He and Cardlestone began to examine the stamps. Jane Baylis said good-night, and she and I left Cardlestone and the man together."

"No one had recognized him?" said Breton.

"No one! Remember, I only once or twice saw Maitland in all my life. The others certainly did not recognize him. At least, I never knew that they did—if they did."

"Tell us," said Spargo, joining in for the first time, "tell us what you and Miss Baylis did?"

"At the foot of the stairs Jane Baylis suddenly said she'd forgotten something in Cardlestone's lobby. As she was going out in to Fleet Street, and I was going down Middle Temple Lane to turn off to my own rooms we said good-night. She went back upstairs. And I went home. And upon my soul and honour that's all I know!"

Spargo suddenly leapt to his feet. He snatched at his cap—a sodden and bedraggled headgear which he had thrown down when they entered the cottage.

"That's enough!" he almost shouted. "I've got it—at last! Breton—where's the nearest telegraph office?"

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Hawes? Straight down this valley? Then, here's for it! Look after things till I'm back, or, when the police come, join me there. I shall catch the first train to town, anyhow, after wiring."

"But—what are you after, Spargo?" exclaimed Breton. "Stop! What on earth——"

But Spargo had closed the door and was running for all he was worth down the valley. Three quarters of an hour later he startled a quiet and peaceful telegraphist by darting, breathless and dirty, into a sleepy country post office, snatching a telegraph form and scribbling down a message in shaky handwriting:—

Rathbury, New Scotland Yard, London.

Arrest Jane Baylis at once for murder of John Maitland. Coming straight to town with full evidence.

Frank Spargo.

Then Spargo dropped on the office bench, and while the wondering operator set the wires ticking, strove to get his breath, utterly spent in his mad race across the heather. And when it was got he set out again—to find the station.

Some days later, Spargo, having seen Stephen Aylmore walk out of the Bow Street dock, cleared of the charge against him, and in a fair way of being cleared of the affair of twenty years before, found himself in a very quiet corner of the Court holding the hand of Jessie Aylmore, who, he discovered, was saying things to him

which he scarcely comprehended. There was nobody near them and the girl spoke freely and warmly.

"But you will come—you will come today—and be properly thanked," she said. "You will—won't you?"

Spargo allowed himself to retain possession of the hand. Also he took a straight look into Jessie Aylmore's eyes.

"I don't want thanks," he said. "It was all a lot of luck. And if I come—today—it will be to see—just you!"

Jessie Aylmore looked down at the two hands.

"I think," she whispered, "I think that is what I really meant!"

**THE
ORANGE-YELLOW
DIAMOND**

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PRETTY PAWNBROKER

On the southern edge of the populous parish of Paddington, in a parallelogram bounded by Oxford and Cambridge Terrace on the south, Praed Street on the north, and by Edgware Road on the east and Spring Street on the west, lies an assemblage of mean streets, the drab dulness of which forms a remarkable contrast to the pretentious architectural grandeurs of Sussex Square and Lancaster Gate, close by. In these streets the observant will always find all those evidences of depressing semi-poverty which are more evident in London than in any other English city. The houses look as if laughter was never heard within them. Where the window blinds are not torn, they are dirty; the folk who come out of the doors wear anxious and depressed faces. Such shops as are there are mainly kept for the sale of food of poor quality: the taverns at the corners are destitute of attraction or pretension. Whoever wanders into these streets finds their sordid shabbiness communicating itself: he escapes, cast down, wondering who the folk are who live in those grey, lifeless cages; what they do, what they think; how life strikes them. Even the very sparrows which fight in the gutters for garbage are less lively than London sparrows usually are; as for the children

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who sit about the doorsteps, they look as if the grass, the trees, the flowers, and the sunlight of the adjacent Kensington Gardens were as far away as the Desert of Gobi. Within this slice of the town, indeed, life is lived, as it were, in a stagnant backwash, which nothing and nobody can stir.

In an upper room of one of the more respectable houses in one of the somewhat superior streets of this neighbourhood, a young man stood looking out of the window one November afternoon. It was then five o'clock, and the darkness was coming: all day a gentle, never-ceasing rain had been bringing the soot down from the dark skies upon the already dingy roofs. It was a dismal and miserable prospect upon which the watcher looked out, but not so miserable nor so dismal as the situation in which he just then found himself. The mean street beneath him was not more empty of cheerfulness than his pockets were empty of money and his stomach of food. He had spent his last penny on the previous day: it, and two other coppers, had gone on a mere mouthful of food and drink: since their disappearance he had eaten nothing. And he was now growing faint with hunger—and to add to his pains, some one, downstairs, was cooking herrings. The smell of the frying-pan nearly drove him ravenous.

He turned from the window presently and looked round at the small room behind him. It was a poor, ill-furnished place—cleanliness, though of a dingy sort, its only recommendation. There was a bed, and a washstand, and a chest of drawers, and a couple of chairs—a few shillings would have purchased the lot

at any second-hand dealer's. In a corner stood the occupant's trunk—all the property he had in the world was in it, save a few books which were carefully ranged on the chimney-piece, and certain writing materials that lay on a small table. A sharp eye, glancing at the books and the writing materials, and at a few sheets of manuscript scattered on the blotting-pad, would have been quick to see that here was the old tale, once more being lived out, of the literary aspirant who, at the very beginning of his career, was finding, by bitter experience, that, of all callings, that of literature is the most precarious.

A half-hesitating tap at the door prefaced the entrance of a woman—the sort of woman who is seen in those streets by the score—a tallish, thinnish woman, old before her time, perpetually harassed, always anxious, always looking as if she expected misfortune. Her face was full of anxiety now as she glanced at her lodger—who, on his part, flushed all over his handsome young face with conscious embarrassment. He knew very well what the woman wanted—and he was powerless to respond to her appeal.

“Mr. Lauriston,” she said in a half whisper, “when do you think you'll be able to let me have a bit of money? It's going on for six weeks now, you know, and I'm that put to it, what with the rent, and the rates—”

Andrew Lauriston shook his head—not in denial, but in sheer perplexity.

“Mrs. Flitwick,” he answered, “I'll give you your money the very minute I get hold of it! I told you

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the other day I'd sold two stories—well, I've asked to be paid for them at once, and the cheque might be here by any post. And I'm expecting another cheque, too—I'm surprised they aren't both here by this. The minute they arrive, I'll settle with you. I'm wanting money myself—as badly as you are!”

“I know that, Mr. Lauriston,” assented Mrs. Flitwick, “and I wouldn't bother you if I wasn't right pressed, myself. But there's the landlord at me—he wants money tonight. And—you'll excuse me for mentioning it—but, till you get your cheques, Mr. Lauriston, why don't you raise a bit of ready money?”

Lauriston looked round at his landlady with an air of surprised enquiry.

“And how would I do that?” he asked.

“You've a right good gold watch, Mr. Lauriston,” she answered. “Any pawnbroker—and there's plenty of 'em, I'm sure!—'ud lend you a few pounds on that. Perhaps you've never had occasion to go to a pawnbroker before? No?—well, and I hadn't once upon a time, but I've had to, whether or no, since I came to letting lodgings, and if I'd as good a watch as yours is, I wouldn't go without money in my pocket! If you've money coming in, you can always get your goods back—and I should be thankful for something, Mr. Lauriston, if it was but a couple o' pounds. My landlord's that hard—”

Lauriston turned and picked up his hat.

“All right, Mrs. Flitwick,” he said quietly. “I'll see what I can do. I—I'd never even thought of it.”

When the woman had gone away, closing the door

behind her, he pulled the watch out of his pocket and looked at it—an old-fashioned, good, gold watch, which had been his father's. No doubt a pawnbroker would lend money on it. But until then he had never had occasion to think of pawnbrokers. He had come to London nearly two years before, intending to make name, fame, and fortune by his pen. He had a little money to be going on with—when he came. It had dwindled steadily, and it had been harder to replace it than he had calculated for. And at last there he was, in that cheap lodging, and at the end of his resources, and the cheque for his first two accepted stories had not arrived. Neither had a loan which, sorely against his will, he had been driven to request from the only man he could think of—an old schoolmate, far away in Scotland. He had listened for the postman's knock, hoping it would bring relief, for four long days—and not one letter had come, and he was despairing and heartsick. But—there was the watch!

He went out presently, and on the stair, feebly lighted by a jet of gas, he ran up against a fellow-lodger—a young Jew, whom he knew by the name of Mr. Melchior Rubinstein, who occupied the rooms immediately beneath his own. He was a quiet, affable little person, with whom Lauriston sometimes exchanged a word or two—and the fact that he sported rings on his fingers, a large pin in his tie, and a heavy watch-chain, which was either real gold or a very good imitation, made Lauriston think that he would give him some advice. He stopped him—with a shy look, and an awkward blush.

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"I say!" he said. "I—the fact is, I'm a bit hard up—temporarily, you know—and I want to borrow some money on my watch. Could you tell me where there's a respectable pawnbroker's?"

Melky—known to every one in the house by that familiar substitute for his more pretentious name—turned up the gas-jet and then held out a slender, long-fingered hand. "Let's look at the watch," he said curtly, in a soft, lisping voice. "I know more than a bit about watches, mister."

Lauriston handed the watch over and watched Melky inquisitively as he looked at it, inside and out, in a very knowing and professional way. Melky suddenly glanced at him. "Now, you wouldn't like to sell this here bit of property, would you, Mr. Lauriston?" he enquired, almost wheedlingly. "I'll give you three quid for it—cash down."

"Thank you—but I wouldn't sell it for worlds," replied Lauriston.

"Say four quid, then," urged Melky. "Here!—between friends, I'll give you four-ten! Spot cash, mind you!"

"No!" said Lauriston. "It belonged to my father. I don't want to sell—I want to borrow."

Melky pushed the watch back into its owner's hand.

"You go round into Praed Street, mister," he said, in business-like fashion. "You'll see a shop there with Daniel Multenius over it. He's a relation o' mine—he'll do what you want. Mention my name, if you like. He'll deal fair with you. And if you ever want to sell, don't forget me."

Lauriston laughed, and went down the stairs, and out into the dismal evening. It was only a step round to Praed Street, and within five minutes of leaving Melky he was looking into Daniel Multenius's window. He remembered now that he had often looked into it, without noticing the odd name above it. It was a window in which there were all sorts of curious things, behind a grille of iron bars, from diamonds and pearls to old ivory and odds and ends of bric-à-brac. A collector of curiosities would have found material in that window to delay him for half-an-hour—but Lauriston only gave one glance at it before hastening down a dark side-passage to a door, over which was a faintly-illuminated sign, showing the words: PLEDGE OFFICE.

He pushed open that door and found himself before several small, boxed-off compartments, each just big enough to contain one person. They were all empty at that moment; he entered one, and seeing nobody about, tapped gently on the counter. He expected to see some ancient and Hebraic figure present itself—instead, light steps came from some recess of the shop, and Lauriston found himself gazing in surprise at a young and eminently pretty girl, who carried some fancy needle-work in her hand, and looked over it at him out of a pair of large, black eyes. For a moment the two gazed at each other, in silence.

“Yes?” said the girl at last. “What can I do for you?”

Lauriston found his tongue.

“Er—is Mr. Multenius in?” he asked. “I—the fact is, I want to see him.”

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“Mr. Multenius is out,” answered the girl. “But I’m in charge—if it’s business.”

She was quietly eyeing Lauriston over, and she saw his fresh-complexioned face colour vividly.

“I do my grandfather’s business when he’s out,” she continued. “Do you want to borrow some money?”

Lauriston pulled out the watch, with more blushes, and pushed it towards her.

“That’s just it,” he answered. “I want to borrow money on that. A friend of mine—fellow-lodger—Mr. Melky Rubinstein—said I could borrow something here. That’s a real good watch, you know.”

The girl glanced at her customer with a swift and almost whimsical recognition of his innocence, and almost carelessly picked up the watch.

“Oh, Melky sent you here, did he?” she said, with a smile. “I see!” She looked the watch over, and snapped open the case. Then she glanced at Lauriston. “How much do you want on this?” she asked.

CHAPTER TWO

MRS GOLDMARK'S EATING-HOUSE

Lauriston thrust his hands in his pockets and looked at the girl in sheer perplexity. She was a very pretty, dark girl, nearly as tall as himself, slender and lissom of figure, and decidedly attractive. There was evident sense of fun and humour in her eyes, and about the corners of her lips: he suddenly got an idea that she was amused at his embarrassment.

"How much can you lend me?" he asked. "What—what's it worth?"

"No, that's not it!" she answered. "It's—what do you want to borrow? You're not used to pledging things, are you?"

"No," replied Lauriston. "This is the first time. Can—can you lend me a few pounds?"

The girl picked up the watch again, and again examined it.

"I'll lend you three pounds fifteen on it," she said suddenly, in business-like tones. "That do?"

"Thank you," replied Lauriston. "That'll do very well—I'm much obliged. I suppose I can have it back any time."

"Any time you bring the money, and pay the interest," replied the girl. "Within twelve calendar

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months and seven days." She picked up a pen and began to fill out a ticket. "Got any copper?" she asked presently.

"Copper?" exclaimed Lauriston. "What for?"

"The ticket," she answered. Then she gave him a quick glance and just as quickly looked down again. "Never mind!" she said. "I'll take it out of the loan. Your name and address, please."

Lauriston presently took the ticket and the little pile of gold, silver, and copper which she handed him. And he lingered.

"You'll take care of that watch," he said, suddenly. "It was my father's, you see."

The girl smiled, reassuringly, and pointed to a heavily-built safe in the rear.

"We've all sorts of family heirlooms in there," she observed. "Make yourself easy."

Lauriston thanked her, raised his hat, and turned away—unwillingly. He would have liked an excuse to stop longer—and he did not quite know why. But he could think of none, so he went—with a backward look when he got to the door. The pretty pawnbroker smiled and nodded. And the next moment he was out in the street, with money in his pocket, and a strange sense of relief, which was mingled with one of surprise. For he had lived for the previous four days on a two-shilling piece—and there, all the time, close by him, had been a place where you could borrow money, easily and very pleasantly.

His first thought was to hurry to his lodgings and pay his landlady. He owed her six weeks' rent, at ten

shillings a week—that would take three pounds out of the money he had just received. But he would still have over fourteen shillings to be going on with—and surely those expected letters would come within the next few postal deliveries. He had asked the editor who had taken two short stories from him to let him have a cheque for them, and in his inexperience had expected to see it arrive by return of post. Also he had put his pride in his pocket, and had written a long letter to his old schoolmate, John Purdie, in far-away Scotland, explaining his present circumstances, and asking him, for old times' sake, to lend him some money until he had finished and sold a novel, which, he was sure, would turn out to be a small gold-mine. John Purdie, he knew, was now a wealthy young man—successor to his father in a fine business; Lauriston felt no doubt that he would respond. And meantime, till the expected letters came, he had money—and when you have lived for four days on two shillings, fourteen shillings seems a small fortune. Certainly, within the last half-hour, life had taken on a roseate tinge—all due to a visit to the pawnshop.

Hurrying back along Praed Street, Lauriston's steps were suddenly arrested. He found himself unconsciously hurrying by an old-fashioned eating-house, from whence came an appetizing odour of cooking food. He remembered then that he had eaten nothing for four-and-twenty hours. His landlady supplied him with nothing: ever since he had gone to her he had done his own catering, going out for his meals. The last meal, on the previous evening, had been a glass of milk and

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a stale, though sizable bun, and now he felt literally ravenous. It was only by an effort that he could force himself to pass the eating-house; once beyond its door, he ran, ran until he reached his lodgings and slipped three sovereigns into Mrs. Flitwick's hands.

"That'll make us right to this week end, Mrs. Flitwick," he said. "Put the receipt in my room."

"And greatly obliged I am to you, Mr. Lauriston," answered the landlady. "And sorry, indeed, you should have had to put yourself to the trouble, but—"

"All right, all right—no trouble—no trouble at all," exclaimed Lauriston. "Quite easy, I assure you!"

He ran out of the house again and back to where he knew there was food. He was only one-and-twenty, a well-built lad, with a healthy appetite, which, until very recently, had always been satisfied, and just then he was feeling that unless he ate and drank, something—he knew not what—would happen. He was even conscious that his voice was weakening, when, having entered the eating-house and dropped into a seat in one of the little boxes into which the place was divided, he asked the waitress for the food and drink which he was now positively aching for. And he had eaten a plateful of fish and two boiled eggs and several thick slices of bread and butter, and drunk the entire contents of a pot of tea before he even lifted his eyes to look round him. But by that time he was conscious of satisfaction, and he sat up and inspected the place to which he had hurried so eagerly. And in the same moment he once more saw Melky.

Melky had evidently just entered the little eating-

house. Evidently, too, he was in no hurry for food or drink. He had paused, just within the entrance, at a desk which stood there, whereat sat Mrs. Goodmark, the proprietress, a plump, pretty young woman, whose dark, flashing eyes turned alternately from watching her waitresses to smiling on her customers as they came to the desk to pay their bills. Melky, his smart billy-cock hat cocked to one side, his sporting-looking overcoat adorned with a flower, was evidently paying compliments to Mrs. Goldmark as he leaned over her desk: she gave him a playful push and called to a waitress to order Mr. Rubinstein a nice steak. And Melky, turning from her with a well satisfied smile, caught sight of Lauriston, and sauntered down to the table at which he sat.

"Get your bit of business done all right?" he asked, confidentially, as he took a seat opposite his fellow-lodger and bent towards him. "Find the old gent accommodating?"

"I didn't see him," answered Lauriston. "I saw a young lady."

"My cousin Zillah," said Melky. "Smart girl, that, mister—worth a pile o' money to the old man—she knows as much about the business as what he does! You wouldn't think, mister," he went on in his soft, lisping tones, "but that girl's had a college education—fact! Old Daniel, he took her to live with him when her father and mother died, she being a little 'un then, and he give her—ah, such an education as I wish I'd had—see? She's quite the lady—is Zillah—but sticks to the old shop—not half, neither!"

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"She seems very business-like," remarked Lauriston, secretly pleased that he had now learned the pretty pawnbroker's name. "She soon did what I wanted."

"In the blood," said Melky, laconically. "We're all of us in that sort o' business, one way or another. Now, between you and me, mister, what did she lend you on that bit o' stuff?"

"Three pounds fifteen," replied Lauriston.

"That's about it," assented Melky, with a nod. He leaned a little nearer. "You don't want to sell the ticket?" he suggested. "Give you a couple o' quid for it, if you do."

"You seem very anxious to buy that watch," said Lauriston, laughing. "No—I don't want to sell the ticket—not I! I wouldn't part with that watch for worlds."

"Well, if you don't, you don't," remarked Melky. "And as to wanting to buy—that's my trade. I ain't no reg'lar business—I buy and sell, anything that comes handy, in the gold and silver line. And as you ain't going to part with that ticker on no consideration, I'll tell you what it's worth, old as it is. Fifteen quid!"

"That's worth knowing, any way," said Lauriston. "I shall always have something by me then, while I have that. You'd have made a profit of a nice bit, then, if I'd sold it to you?"

"It 'ud be a poor world, mister, if you didn't get no profit, wouldn't it?" assented Melky calmly. "We're all of us out to make profit. Look here!—between you and me—you're a lit'ry gent, ain't you? Write a bit, what? Do you want to earn a fiver—comfortable?"

"I should be very glad," replied Lauriston.

"There's a friend o' mine," continued Melky, "wholesale jeweller, down Shoreditch way, wants to get out a catalogue. He ain't no lit'ry powers, d'you see? Now, he'd run to a fiver—cash down—if some writing feller 'ud touch things up a bit for him, like. Lor' bless you!—it wouldn't take you more'n a day's work! What d'ye say to it?"

"I wouldn't mind earning five pounds at that," answered Lauriston.

"Right-oh!" said Melky. "Then some day next week, I'll take you down to see him—he's away till then. And—you'll pay me ten per cent. on the bit o' business, won't you, mister? Business is business, ain't it?"

"All right!" agreed Lauriston. "That's a bargain, of course."

Melky nodded and turned to his steak, and Lauriston presently left him and went away. The plump lady at the desk gave him a smile as she handed him his change.

"Hope to see you again, sir," she said.

Lauriston went back to his room, feeling that the world had changed. He had paid his landlady, he had silver and copper in his pocket, he had the chance of earning five pounds during the coming week—and he expected a cheque for his two stories by every post. And if John Purdie made him the loan he had asked for, he would be able to devote a whole month to finishing his novel—and then, perhaps, there would be fame and riches. The dismal November evening disappeared in a dream of hope.

But by the end of the week hope was dropping to

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zero again with Lauriston. No letters had arrived—either from John Purdie or the editor. On the Sunday morning he was again face to face with the last half-crown. He laid out his money very cautiously that day, but when he had paid for a frugal dinner at a cheap coffee-shop, he had only a shilling left. He wandered into Kensington Gardens that Sunday afternoon, wondering what he had best do next. And as he stood by the railings of the ornamental water, watching the water-fowls' doings, somebody bade him good-day, and he turned to find the pretty girl of the pawnshop standing at his side and smiling shyly at him.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEAD MAN

Lauriston was thinking about Zillah at the very moment in which she spoke to him: the memory of her dark eyes and the friendly smile that she had given him as he left the pawnshop had come as a relief in the midst of his speculations as to his immediate future. And now, as he saw her real self, close to him, evidently disposed to be friendly, he blushed like any girl, being yet at that age when shyness was still a part of his character. Zillah blushed too—but she was more self-possessed than Lauriston.

“I’ve been talking to my Cousin Melky about you,” she said quickly. “Or, rather, he’s been talking to me. He says he’s going to introduce you to a man who wants his catalogue put in shape—for five pounds. Don’t you do it for five pounds! I know that man—charge him ten!”

Lauriston moved away with her down the walk.

“Oh, but I couldn’t do that, now!” he said eagerly. “You see I promised I’d do it for five.”

Zillah gave him a quick glance.

“Don’t you be silly!” she said. “When anybody like Melky offers you five pounds for anything, ask them double. They’ll give it. You don’t know much about money matters, do you?”

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Lauriston laughed, and gaining confidence, gave the girl a knowing look.

"Not much," he admitted, "else I wouldn't have had to do that bit of business with you the other day."

"Oh—that!" she said indifferently. "That's nothing. You'd be astonished if you knew what sort of people just have to run round to us, now and then—I could tell you some secrets! But—I guessed you weren't very well up in money matters, all the same. Writing people seldom are."

"I suppose you are?" suggested Lauriston.

"I've been mixed up in them all my life, more or less," she answered. "Couldn't help being, with my surroundings. You won't think me inquisitive if I ask you something? Were you—hard up—when you came round the other night?"

"Hard up's a mild term," replied Lauriston, frankly. "I hadn't a penny!"

"Excepting a gold watch worth twelve or fifteen pounds," remarked Zillah, drily. "And how long had you been like that?"

"Two or three days—more or less," answered Lauriston. "You see, I've been expecting money for more than a week—that was it."

"Has it come?" she asked.

"No—it hasn't," he replied, with a candid blush. "That's a fact!"

"Will it come—soon?" she demanded.

"By George!—I hope so!" he exclaimed. "I'll be hard up again, if it doesn't."

"And then you offer to do for five what you might

easily get ten for!" she said, almost reproachfully. "Let me give you a bit of advice—never accept a first offer. Stand out for a bit more—especially from anybody like my cousin Melky."

"Is Melky a keen one, then?" enquired Lauriston.

"Melky's a young Jew," said Zillah, calmly. "I'm not—I'm half-and-half—a mixture. My mother was Jew—my father wasn't. Well—if you want money to be going on with, and you've got any more gold watches, you know where to come. Don't you ever go with empty pockets in London while you've got a bit of property to pledge! You're not a Londoner, of course?"

"I'm a Scotsman!" said Lauriston.

"To be sure—I knew it by your tongue," asserted Zillah. "And trying to make a living by writing! Well, you'll want courage—and money. Have you had any luck?"

"I've sold two stories," answered Lauriston, who by that time was feeling as if the girl was an old friend. "They come to twenty pounds for the two, at the rate that magazine pays, and I've asked for a cheque—it's that I'm waiting for. It ought to come—any time."

"Oh, but I know that game!" said Zillah. "I've two friends—girls—who write. I know how they have to wait—till publication, or till next pay-day. What a pity that some of you writers don't follow some other profession that would bring in a good income—then you could do your writing to please yourselves, and not be dependent on it. Haven't you thought of that?"

"Often!" answered Lauriston. "And it wouldn't do—for me, anyway. I've made my choice. I'll stick to

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my pen—and swim or sink with it. And I'm not going to sink!"

"That's the way to talk—to be sure!" said the girl. "But—keep yourself in money, if you can. Don't go without money for three days when you've anything you can raise money on. You see how practical I am! But you've got to be in this world. Will you tell me something?"

"It strikes me," answered Lauriston, looking at her narrowly and bringing the colour to her cheeks, "that I'm just about getting to this—that I'd tell you anything! And so—what is it?"

"How much money have you left?" she asked softly.

"Precisely a shilling—and a copper or two," he answered.

"And—if that cheque doesn't arrive?" she suggested.

"Maybe I'll be walking round to Praed Street again," he said, laughing. "I've a bit of what you call property, yet."

The girl nodded, and turned towards a side-walk that led across the Gardens.

"All right," she said. "Don't think me inquisitive—I don't like to think of—of people like you being hard up: I'm not wrapped up in business as much as all that. Let's talk of something else—tell me what you write about."

Lauriston spent the rest of that afternoon with Zillah, strolling about Kensington Gardens. He had lived a very lonely life since coming to London, and it was a new and pleasant experience to him to have an intelli-

gent companion to talk to. There was a decided sense of exhilaration within him when he finally left her; as for Zillah, she went homewards in a very thoughtful mood, already conscious that she was more than half in love with this good-looking lad who had come so strangely into her life. And at the corner of Praed Street she ran up against Mr. Melky Rubinstein, and button-holed him, and for ten minutes talked seriously to him. Melky, who had good reasons of his own for keeping in his cousin's favour, listened like a lamb to all she had to say, and went off promising implicit obedience to her commandments.

"Zillah ain't half gone on that chap!" mused Melky, as he pursued his way. "Now, ain't it extraordinary that a girl who'll come into a perfect fortune should go and fall head over ears in love with a red-headed young feller what ain't got a penny to bless hisself with! Not but what he ain't got good looks—and brains. And brains is brains, when all's said!"

That night, as Lauriston sat writing in his shabby little room, a knock came at his door—the door opened, and Melky slid in, laying his finger to the side of his large nose in token of confidence.

"Hope I ain't interrupting," said Melky. "I say, mister, I been thinking about that catalogue business. Now I come to sort of reflect on it, I think my friend'll go to ten pound. So we'll say ten pound—what? And I'll take you to see him next Friday. And I say, mister—if a pound or two on account 'ud be of any service—say the word, d'ye see?"

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With this friendly assurance, Melky plunged his hand into a hip-pocket, and drew out some gold, which he held towards Lauriston on his open palm.

"Two or three pound on account, now, mister?" he said, ingratiatingly. "You're welcome as the flowers in May!"

But Lauriston shook his head; he had already decided on a plan of his own, if the expected remittance did not arrive next morning.

"No, thank you," he answered. "It's uncommonly good of you—but I can manage very well indeed—I can, really! Next Friday, then—I'll go with you. I'm very much obliged to you."

Melky slipped his money into his pocket—conscious of having done his part. "Just as you like, mister," he said. "But you was welcome, you know. Next Friday, then—and you can reckon on cash down for this job."

The Monday morning brought neither of the expected letters to Lauriston. But he had not spoken without reason when he said to Zillah that he had a bit of property to fall back upon—now that he knew how ready money could easily be raised. He had some pledgeable property in his trunk—and when the remittances failed to arrive, he determined to avail himself of it. Deep down in a corner of the trunk he had two valuable rings—all that his mother had left him, with the exception of two hundred pounds, with which he had ventured to London, and on which he had lived up to then. He got the rings out towards the end of Monday afternoon, determining to take them round to Daniel Multenius and

raise sufficient funds on them to last him for, at any rate, another month or two. He had little idea of the real value of such articles, and he had reasons of his own for not showing the rings to Melky Rubinstein; his notion was to wait until evening, when he would go to the pawnshop at about the same time as on his previous visit, in the hope of finding Zillah in charge again. After their meeting and talk of the afternoon before, he felt that she would do business with him in a sympathetic spirit—and if he could raise twenty pounds on the rings he would be free of all monetary anxiety for many a long week to come.

It was half-past five o'clock of that Monday evening when Lauriston, for the second time, turned into the narrow passage which led to the pawnshop door. He had already looked carefully through the street window, in the hope of seeing Zillah inside the front shop. But there was no Zillah to be seen; the front shop was empty. Nor did Zillah confront him when he stepped into the little boxed-in compartment in the pawnshop. There was a curious silence in the place—broken only by the quiet, regular ticking of a clock. That ticking grew oppressive during the minute or two that he waited expecting somebody to step forward. He rapped on the counter at last—gently at first, then more insistently. But nobody came. The clock—hidden from his sight—went on ticking.

Lauriston bent over the counter at last and craned his neck to look into the open door of a little parlour which lay behind the shop. The next instant, with no thought but of the exigencies of the moment, he had

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leapt over the partition and darted into the room. There, stretched out across the floor, his head lying on the hearthrug, his hands lying inert and nerveless at his sides, lay an old man, grey-bearded, venerable—Daniel Multenius, no doubt. He lay very still, very statuesque—and Lauriston, bending over and placing a trembling hand on the high, white forehead, knew that he was dead.

He started up—his only idea that of seeking help. The whole place was so still that he knew he was alone with the dead in it. Instinctively, he ran through the front shop to the street door—and into the arms of a man who was just entering.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PLATINUM SOLITAIRE

The newcomer, an elderly, thick-set man, who, in spite of his plain clothes, looked as if he were an official of some sort and carried some documents in his hand, at which he was glancing as he entered, started and exclaimed as Lauriston, in his haste, ran up against him. "Hullo!" he said. "What's the matter? You seem in a hurry, young fellow!"

Lauriston, almost out of breath with excitement, turned and pointed to the open door of the little parlour.

"There's an old man—lying in there—dead!" he whispered. "A grey-bearded old man—is it the pawnbroker—Mr. Multenius?"

The man stared, craned his neck to glance in the direction which Lauriston's shaking finger indicated, and then started forward. But he suddenly paused, and motioned Lauriston to go first—and before following him he closed the street door.

"Now then, where?" he said. "Dead, do you say?" He followed Lauriston into the parlour, uttered a sharp exclamation as he caught sight of the recumbent figure, and, bending down, laid a hand on the forehead. "Dead, right enough, my lad!" he muttered. "Been dead some minutes, too. But—where's the girl—the grand-daughter? Have you seen anybody?"

"Not a soul!" answered Lauriston. "Since I came

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in, the whole place has been as still as—as it is now!”

The man stared at him for a second or two, silently; then, as if he knew the ins and outs of the establishment, he strode to an inner door, threw it open and revealed a staircase.

“Hullo there!” he called loudly. “Hullo! Miss Wildrose! Are you there?”

This was the first time Lauriston had heard Zillah’s surname: even in the midst of that startling discovery, it struck him as a very poetical one. But he had no time to reflect on it—the man turned back into the parlour.

“She must be out,” he said. “Do you say you found him?”

“Yes—I found him,” answered Lauriston. “Just now.”

“And what were you doing here?” asked the man. “Who are you?”

Lauriston fancied he detected a faint note of suspicion in these questions, and he drew himself up, with a flush on his face.

“My name’s Andrew Lauriston,” he answered. “I live close by. I came in on—business. Who are you?”

“Well, if it comes to that, my lad,” said the man, “I’m Detective-Sergeant Ayscough—known well enough around these parts! I came to see the old gentleman about these papers. Now—what was your business, then?”

He was watching Lauriston very keenly, and Lauriston, suddenly realizing that he was in an awkward position, determined on candour.

“Well, if you really want to know,” he said, “I came to borrow some money—on these rings.”

And he opened his left hand and showed the detective the two rings which he had taken from his trunk—not half-an-hour before.

“Your property?” asked Ayscough.

“Of course they’re my property!” exclaimed Lauriston. “Whose else should they be?”

Ayscough’s glance wandered from the rings to a table which stood, a little to one side, in the middle of the parlour. Lauriston turned in that direction, also. Two objects immediately met his eye. On the table stood a small tray, full of rings—not dissimilar in style and appearance to those which he held in his hand: old-fashioned rings. The light from the gas-brackets above the mantel-piece caught the facets of the diamonds in those rings and made little points of fire; here and there he saw the shimmer of pearls. But there was another object. Close by the tray of old rings lay a book—a beautifully bound book, a small quarto in size, with much elaborate gold ornament on the back and side, and gilt clasps holding the heavy leather binding together. It looked as if some hand had recently thrown this book carelessly on the table.

But Ayscough gave little, if any, attention to the book: his eyes were fixed on the rings in the tray—and he glanced from them to Lauriston’s rings.

“Um!” he said presently. “Odd that you have a couple of rings, young man, just like—those! Isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” demanded Lauriston, flushing scarlet. “You don’t suggest—”

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"Don't suggest anything—just now," answered the detective, quietly. "But you must stop here with me, until I find out more. Come to the door—we must have help here."

Lauriston saw there was nothing to do but to obey, and he followed Ayscough to the street door. The detective opened it, looked out, and waiting a few minutes, beckoned to a policeman who presently strolled along. After a whispered word or two, the policeman went away, and Ayscough beckoned Lauriston back into the shop.

"Now," he said, "there'll be some of our people and a surgeon along in a few minutes—before they come, just tell me your story. You're an honest-looking young chap—but you must admit that it looks a bit queer that I should find you running out of this shop, old Multenius dead inside his parlour, and you with a couple of rings in your possession which look uncommonly like his property! Just tell me how it came about."

Lauriston told him the plain truth—from the pawning of the watch to the present visit. Ayscough watched him narrowly—and at the end nodded his head.

"That sounds like a straight tale, Mr. Lauriston," he said. "I'm inclined to believe every word you say. But I shall have to report it, and all the circumstances, and you'll have to prove that these two rings were your mother's, and all that—and you must stay here till the doctor comes with our people. Queer that the old man should be alone! I wonder where his grand-daughter is?"

But just then the street door opened and Zillah came

in, a big bunch of flowers under one arm, some small parcels in the other. At the sight of the two men she started; crimsoned as she saw Lauriston; paled again as she noticed that Ayscough was evidently keeping an eye on him.

"Mr. Ayscough!" she exclaimed. "What's this?—is something the matter? What are you doing here?" she went on hurriedly, turning to Lauriston. "Inside the shop! What's happened?—tell me, one of you?"

The detective purposely kept himself and Lauriston between Zillah and the open door at the rear of the shop. He made a kindly motion of his head towards her.

"Now, my dear!" he said. "Don't get upset—your grandfather was getting a very old man, you know—and we can't expect old gentlemen to live for ever. Take it quietly, now!"

The girl turned and laid her flowers and parcels on the counter. Lauriston, watching her anxiously, saw that she was nerving herself to be brave.

"That means—he's dead?" she said. "I am quiet—you see I'm quiet. Tell me what's happened—you tell me," she added, glancing at Lauriston. "Tell me—now!"

"I came in and found no one here, and I looked round through the door into the parlour there," answered Lauriston, "and I saw your grandfather lying on the floor. So I jumped over the counter and went to him."

Zillah moved forward as if to go into the parlour. But the detective stopped her, glancing from her to Lauriston.

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"You know this young man, Miss Wildrose?" he asked. "You've met him before?"

"Yes," replied Zillah, confidently. "He's Mr. Lauriston. Let me go in there, please. Can nothing be done?"

But Ayscough only shook his head. There was nothing to be done—but to await the arrival of the doctor. They followed the girl into the parlour and stood by while she bent over the dead man. She made no demonstration of grief, and when Ayscough presently suggested that she should go upstairs until the doctor had come, she went quietly away.

"Hadn't we better lift him on that sofa?" suggested Lauriston.

"Not till our people and the police-surgeon have seen him," answered Ayscough, shaking his head. "I want to know all about this—he may have died a natural death—a seizure of some sort—and again, he mayn't—They'll be here in a minute."

Lauriston presently found himself a passive spectator while a police-inspector, another man in plain clothes, and the doctor examined the body, after hearing Ayscough's account of what had just happened. He was aware that he was regarded with suspicion—the inspector somewhat brusquely bade him stay where he was: it would, indeed, have been impossible to leave, for there was a policeman at the door, in which, by his superior's orders, he had turned the key. And there was a general, uncomfortable sort of silence in the place while the doctor busied himself about the body.

"This man has been assaulted!" said the doctor, sud-

denly turning to the inspector. "Look here!—he's not only been violently gripped by the right arm—look at that bruise—but taken savagely by the throat. There's no doubt of that. Old and evidently feeble as he was, the shock would be quite enough to kill him. But—that's how it's been done, without a doubt."

The inspector turned, looking hard at Lauriston.

"Did you see anybody leaving the place when you entered?" he asked.

"There was no one about here when I came in—either at the street door or at the side door," replied Lauriston, readily. "The whole place was quiet—deserted—except for him. And—he was dead when I found him."

The inspector drew Ayscough aside and they talked in whispers for a few minutes, eyeing Lauriston now and then; eventually they approached him.

"I understand you're known here, and that you live in the neighbourhood," said the inspector. "You'll not object if the sergeant goes round with you to your lodgings—you'll no doubt be able to satisfy him about your respectability, and so on. I don't want to suggest anything—but—you understand?"

"I understand," replied Lauriston. "I'll show or tell him anything he likes. I've told you the plain truth."

"Go with him now," directed the inspector; "you know what to do, Ayscough!"

Half an hour later, when the dead man had been carried to his room, and the shop and house had been closed, Melky Rubinstein, who had come in while the police were still there, and had remained when they

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had gone, stood talking to Zillah in the upstairs sitting-room. Melky was unusually grave: Zillah had already gathered that the police had some suspicion about Lauriston.

“I’ll go round there and see what the detective fellow’s doing with him,” said Melky. “I ain’t got no suspicion about him—not me! But—it’s an awkward position—and them rings, too! Now, if he’d only ha’ shown ’em to me, first, Zillah—see?”

“Do go, Melky!” urged Zillah tearfully. “Of course, he’d nothing to do with it. Oh!—I wish I’d never gone out!”

Melky went downstairs. He paused for a moment in the little parlour, glancing meditatively at the place where the old man had been found dead. And suddenly his keen eyes saw an object which lay close to the fender, half hidden by a tassel of the hearthrug, and he stooped and picked it up—a solitaire stud, made of platinum, and ornamented with a curious device.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TWO LETTERS

Once outside the shop, Lauriston turned sharply on the detective.

"Look here!" he said. "I wish you'd just tell me the truth. Am I suspected? Am I—in some way or other—in custody?"

Ayscough laughed quietly, wagging his head.

"Certainly not in custody," he answered. "And as to the other—well, you know, Mr. Lauriston, supposing we put it in this way?—suppose you'd been me, and I'd been you, half-an-hour ago? What would you have thought if you'd found me in the situation and under the circumstances in which I found you? Come, now!"

"Yes," replied Lauriston, after a moment's reflection. "I suppose it's natural that you should suspect me—finding me there, alone with the old man. But—"

"It's not so much suspicion in a case of this sort, as a wish to satisfy one's self," interrupted the detective. "You seem a gentleman-like young fellow, and you may be all right. I want to know that you are—I'd like to know that you are! It would be no satisfaction to me to fasten this business on you, I can assure you. And if you like to tell me about yourself, and how you came to go to Multenius's—why, it would be as well."

"There's not much to tell," answered Lauriston. "I came from Scotland to London, two years ago or there-

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abouts, to earn my living by writing. I'd a bit of money when I came—I've lived on it till now. I've just begun to earn something. I've been expecting a cheque for some work for these last ten or twelve days, but I was running short last week—so I went to that place to pawn my watch—I saw the young lady there. As my cheque hadn't arrived today, I went there again to pawn those rings I told you about and showed you. And—that's all. Except this—I was advised to go to Multenius's by a relation of theirs, Mr. Rubinstein, who lodges where I do. He knows me."

"Oh, Melky Rubinstein!" said Ayscough. "I know Melky—sharp chap he is. He sold me this pin I'm wearing. Well, that seems quite a straightforward tale, Mr. Lauriston. I've no doubt all will be satisfactory. You've friends in London, of course?"

"No—none," replied Lauriston. "And scarcely an acquaintance. I've kept to myself—working hard: I've had no time—nor inclination, either—to make friends. Here's the house where I lodge—it's not much of a place, but come in."

They had reached Mrs. Flitwick's house by that time, and Mrs. Flitwick herself was in the narrow, shabby passage as they entered. She immediately produced two letters.

"Here's two letters for you, Mr. Lauriston," she said, with a sharp glance at Ayscough. "One of 'em's a registered—I did sign for it. So I kept 'em myself, instead of sending 'em up to your room."

"Thank you, Mrs. Flitwick," said Lauriston. He took the letters, saw that the writing on the registered

envelope was his old friend John Purdie's, and that the other letter was from the magazine to which he had sold his stories, and turned to Ayscough. "Come up to my room," he continued. "We'll talk up there."

Ayscough followed him up to his room—once inside, and the door shut, Lauriston tore open the letter from the magazine, and extracted a printed form and a cheque for twenty guineas. He took one look at them and thrust them into the detective's hands.

"There!" he said, with a sigh of mingled relief and triumph. "There's a proof of the truth of one statement I made to you! That's the expected cheque I told you of. Excuse me while I look at the other letter."

Out of the registered letter came a bank-note—for twenty pounds—and a hastily scribbled note which Lauriston eagerly read. "Dear old Andie," it ran, "I've only just got your letter, for I've been from home for a fortnight, and had no letters sent on to me. Of course you'll make me your banker until your book's finished—and afterwards, too, if need be. Here's something to be going on with—but I'm coming to London in a day or two, as it happens, and will go into matter—I'll call on you as soon as I arrive. Excuse this scrawl—post time. Always yours, John Purdie."

Lauriston thrust that letter, too, into Ayscough's hands.

"If I've no friends in London, there's proof of having one in my own country!" he exclaimed. "Ah!—if those letters had only come before I went off to Praed Street!"

"Just so!" agreed the detective, glancing the letters

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and their accompaniments over. "Well, I'm glad you're able to show me these, Mr. Lauriston, anyway. But now, about those rings—between you and me, I wish they hadn't been so much like those that were lying in that tray on the old man's table. It's an unfortunate coincidence!—because some folks might think, you know, that you'd just grabbed a couple of those as you left the place. Eh?"

"My rings have been in that trunk for two or three years," asserted Lauriston. "They were my mother's, and I believe she'd had them for many a year before she died. They may resemble those that we saw in that tray, but—"

"Well, I suppose you can bring somebody—if necessary—that is—to prove that they were your mother's, can't you?" asked Ayscough. "That'll make matters all right—on that point. And as for the rest—it's very lucky you know Melky Rubinstein, and that the girl knew you as a customer. But, my faith!—I wish you'd caught a glimpse of somebody leaving that shop! For there's no doubt the old man met his death by violence."

"I know nothing of it," said Lauriston, "I saw no one."

Just then Melky came in. He glanced at the cheque and the bank-notes lying on the table, and nodded to Lauriston as if he understood their presence. Then he turned to Ayscough, almost anxiously.

"I say, Mr. Ayscough!" he said, deprecatingly. "You ain't going to be so unkind as to mix up this here young fellow in what's happened. S'elp me, Mr. Ayscough, I couldn't believe anything o' that sort about

him, nohow—nor would my cousin, Zillah, what you know well enough, neither; he's as quiet as a lamb, Mr. Ayseough, is Mr. Lauriston—ain't I known him, lodging here as he does, this many a month? I'll give my word for him, anyway, Mr. Ayseough! And you police gentlemen know me. Don't you now, Mr. Ayseough?"

"Very well indeed, my boy!" agreed the detective, heartily. "And I'll tell you what—I shall have to trouble Mr. Lauriston to go round with me to the station, just to give a formal account of what happened, and a bit of explanation, you know—I'm satisfied myself about him, and so, no doubt, will our people be, but you come with us, Melky, and say a word or two—say you've known him for some time, d'ye see—it'll help."

"Anything to oblige a friend, Mr. Ayseough," said Melky. He motioned to Lauriston to put his money in his pocket. "Glad to see your letters turned up," he whispered as they went downstairs. "I say!—a word in your ear—don't you tell these here police chaps any more than you need—I'll stand up for you."

The detective's report, a little questioning of Lauriston, and Melky's fervent protestations on Lauriston's behalf, served to satisfy the authorities at the police-station, and Lauriston was allowed to go—admonished by the inspector that he'd be wanted at the inquest, as the most important witness. He went out into the street with Melky.

"Come and have a bit o' supper at Mrs. Goldmark's," suggested Melky. "I shall have my hands full tonight

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at the poor old man's, but I ain't had nothing since dinner."

Lauriston, however, excused himself. He wanted to go home and write letters—at once. But he promised to look round at the pawnshop later in the evening, to see if he could be of any use, and to give Melky a full account of his finding of the old pawnbroker.

"Ah!" remarked Melky, as they pushed at the door of the eating-house. "And ain't it going to be a nice job to find the man that scragged him?—I don't think! But I'm going to take a hand at that game, mister!—let alone the police."

Mrs. Goldmark was out. She had heard the news, said the waitress who was left in charge, and had gone round to do what she could for Miss Zillah. So Melky, deprived of the immediate opportunity of talk with Mrs. Goldmark, ordered his supper, and while he ate and drank, cogitated and reflected. And his thoughts ran chiefly on the platinum solitaire stud which he had carefully bestowed in his vest pocket.

It was Melky's firm belief—already—that the stud had been dropped in Daniel Multenius's back parlour by some person who had no business there—in other words by the old man's assailant. And ever since he had found the stud, Melky had been wondering and speculating on his chances of finding its owner. Of one thing he was already certain that the owner, whoever he was, was no ordinary person. Ordinary, everyday persons do not wear studs or tie-pins on chains made of platinum—the most valuable of all the metals. How came a solitaire stud, made of a metal far more valuable than gold, and

designed and ornamented in a peculiar fashion, to be lying on the hearthrug of old Daniel Multenius's room? It was not to be believed that the old man had dropped it there—no, affirmed Melky to himself, with conviction, that bit of personal property had been dropped there, out of a loose shirt-cuff by some man who had called on Daniel not long before Andie Lauriston had gone in, and who for some mysterious reason had scragged the old fellow. And now the question was—who was that man?

“Got to find that out, somehow!” mused Melky. “Else that poor chap’ll be in a nice fix—s’elp me, he will! And that ’ud never do!”

Melky, in spite of his keenness as a business man, and the fact that from boyhood he had had to fight the world by himself, had a peculiarly soft heart—he tended altogether to verge on the sentimental. He had watched Lauriston narrowly, and had developed a decided feeling for him—moreover, he now knew that his cousin Zillah, hitherto adamant to many admirers, had fallen in love with Lauriston: clearly, Lauriston must be saved. Melky knew police ways and methods, and he felt sure that whatever Ayscough, a good-natured man, might think, the superior authorities would view Lauriston's presence in the pawnshop with strong suspicion. Therefore—the real culprit must be found. And he, Melky Rubinstein—he must have a go at that game.

He finished his supper, thinking hard all the time he ate and drank; finally he approached the desk to pay his bill. The young woman whom Mrs. Goldmark had left in charge lifted the lid of the desk to get some change—and Melky's astonished eyes immediately fell on an

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object which lay on top of a little pile of papers. That object was the duplicate of the platinum solitaire which Melky had in his pocket. Without ceremony—being well known there—he at once picked it up.

“What’s this bit of jewellery?” he demanded.

“That?” said the waitress, indifferently. “Oh, one of the girls picked it up the other day off a table where a stranger had been sitting—we think he’d dropped it. Mrs. Goldmark says it’s valuable, so she put it away, in case he comes again. But we haven’t seen him since.”

Melky took a good look at the second stud. Then he put it back in the desk, picked up his change, and went away—in significant silence.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SPANISH MANUSCRIPT

Lauriston, walking back to his room after leaving Melky at the door of the eating-house, faced the situation in which an unfortunae combination of circumstances had placed him. Ayscough had been placable enough; the authorities at the police-station had heard his own version of things with attention—but he was still conscious that he was under a certain amount of suspicion. More than that, he felt convinced that the police would keep an eye on him that night. Ayscough, indeed, had more than hinted that that would probably be done. For anything he knew, some plain-clothes man might be shadowing him even then—anyway, there had been no mistaking the almost peremptory request of the inspector that he should report himself at the police station in the morning. It was no use denying the fact—he was suspected, in some degree.

He knew where the grounds of suspicion lay—in his possession of two rings, which were undoubtedly very similar to the rings which lay in the tray that he and the detective had found on the table in the back-parlour of the pawnshop. It needed no effort on the part of one who had already had considerable experience in the construction of plots for stories, to see how the police would build up a theory of their own. Here, they would

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say, is a young fellow, who on his own confession, is so hard up, so penniless, indeed, that he has had to pawn his watch. He has got to know something of this particular pawnshop, and of its keepers—he watches the girl leave; he ascertains that the old man is alone; he enters, probably he sees that tray of rings lying about; he grabs a couple of the rings; the old man interrupts him in the act; he seizes the old man, to silence his outcries; the old man, feeble enough at any time, dies under the shock. A clear, an unmistakable case!

What was he, Lauriston, to urge against the acceptance of such a theory? He thought over everything that could be said on his behalf. The friendliness of Zillah and her cousin Melky towards him could be dismissed—that, when it came to it, would weigh little against the cold marshalling of facts which a keen legal mind would put into the opposite scale. His own contention that it was scarcely probable that he should have gone to the pawnshop except to pledge something, and that that something was the rings, would also be swept aside, easily enough: his real object, the other side would say, had been robbery when the old man was alone: what evidence had he that the two rings which he had in his hand when Ayscough found him hurrying out of the shop were really his?

Here, Lauriston knew he was in a difficulty. He had kept these two rings safely hidden in his old-fashioned trunk ever since coming to London, and had never shown them to a single person—he had, indeed, never seen them himself for a long time until he took them out that afternoon. But where was his proof of that? He had no

relations to whom he could appeal. His mother had possessed an annuity; just sufficient to maintain her and her son, and to give Lauriston a good education: it had died with her, and all that she had left him, to start life on, was about two hundred pounds and some small personal belongings, of which the rings and his father's watch and chain were a part. And he remembered now that his mother had kept those rings as securely put away as he had kept them since her death—until they came into his hands at her death he had only once seen them; she had shown them to him when he was a boy and had said they were very valuable. Was it possible that there was any one, far away in Scotland, who had known his mother and who would come forward—if need arose—and prove that those rings had been her property? But when he had put this question to himself, he had to answer it with a direct negative—he knew of no one.

There was one gleam of hope in this critical situation. John Purdie was coming to London. Lauriston had always felt that he could rely on John Purdie, and he had just received proof of the value of his faith in his old schoolmate. John Purdie would tell him what to do: he might even suggest the names of some of Mrs. Lauriston's old friends. And perhaps the need might not arise—there must surely be some clue to the old pawnbroker's assailant; surely the police would go deeper into the matter. He cheered up at these thoughts, and having written replies to the two welcome letters and asked John Purdie to see him immediately on his arrival in town, he went out again to the post-office and to fulfil his promise to Melky to call at the pawnshop.

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Lauriston was naturally of quick observation. He noticed now, as he stepped out into the ill-lighted, gloomy street that a man was pacing up and down in front of the house. This man took no notice of him as he passed, but before he had reached Praed Street, he glanced around, and saw that he was following him. He followed him to Spring Street post-office; he was in his rear when Lauriston reached the pawnshop. Idly and perfunctorily as the man seemed to be strolling about, Lauriston was sure that he was shadowing him—and he told Melky of the fact when Melky admitted him to the shop by the private door.

“Likely enough, mister,” remarked Melky. “But I shouldn’t bother myself about it if I were you. There’ll be more known about this affair before long. Now, look here,” he continued, leading the way into the little back-parlour where Lauriston had found Daniel Multenius lying dead, “here’s you and me alone—Zillah, she’s upstairs, and Mrs. Goldmark is with her. Just you tell me what you saw when you came in here, d’you see, Mr. Lauriston—never mind the police—just give me the facts. I ain’t no fool, you know, and I’m going to work this thing out.”

Lauriston gave Melky a complete account of his connection with the matter: Melky checked off all the points on his long fingers. At the end he turned to the table and indicated the finely-bound book which Lauriston had noticed when he and the detective had first looked round.

“The police,” said Melky, “made Zillah lock up that tray o’ rings that was there in a drawer what she had to clear out for ’em, and they’ve put a seal on it till to-

morrow. They've got those rings of yours, too, mister, haven't they?"

"They said it would be best for me to leave them with them," answered Lauriston. "Ayscough advised it. They gave me a receipt for them, you know."

"All right," remarked Melky. "But there's something they ain't had the sense to see the importance of—that fine book there. Mister!—that there book wasn't in this parlour, nor in this shop, nor in this house, at a quarter to five o'clock this afternoon, when my cousin Zillah went out, leaving the poor old man alone. She'll swear to that. Now then, who brought it here—who left it here? Between the time Zillah went out, mister, and the time you come in, and found what you did find, somebody—somebody!—had been in here and left that book behind him! And—mark you!—it wasn't pawned, neither. That's a fact! And—it's no common book, that. Look at it, Mr. Lauriston—you'd ought to know something about books. Look at it!—s'elp me if I don't feel there's a clue in that there volume, whoever it belongs to!"

Lauriston took the book in his hands. He had only glanced at it casually before; now he examined it carefully, while Melky stood at his elbow, watching. The mysterious volume was certainly worthy of close inspection—a small quarto, wonderfully bound in old dark crimson morocco leather, and ornamented on sides and back with curious gold arabesque work: a heavy clasp, also intricately wrought, held the boards together. Lauriston, something of a book lover, whose natural inclination was to spend his last shilling on a book rather

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than on beef and bread, looked admiringly at this fine specimen of the binder's art as he turned it over.

"That's solid gold, isn't it?" he asked as he unfastened the clasp. "You know."

"Solid gold it is, mister—and no error," assented Melky. "Now, what's inside? It ain't no blooming account-book, I'll bet!"

Lauriston opened the volume, to reveal leaves of old vellum, covered with beautiful fine writing. He had sufficient knowledge of foreign languages to know what he was looking at.

"That's Spanish!" he said. "An old Spanish manuscript—and I should say it's worth a rare lot of money. How could it have come here?"

Melky took the old volume out of Lauriston's hands, and put it away in a corner cupboard.

"Ah, just so, mister!" he said. "But we'll keep that question to ourselves—for awhile. Don't you say nothing to the police about that there old book—I'll give Zillah the tip. More hangs round that than we know of yet. Now look here!—there'll be the opening of the inquest tomorrow. You be careful! Take my tip and don't let 'em get more out of you than's necessary. I'll go along with you. I'm going to stop here tonight—watch-dog, you know. Mrs. Goldmark and another friend's going to be here as well, so Zillah'll have company. And I say, Zillah wants a word with you—stop here, and I'll send her down."

Lauriston presently found himself alone with Zillah in the little parlour. She looked at him silently, with

eyes full of anxiety: he suddenly realized that the anxiety was for himself.

"Don't!" he said, moving close to her and laying his hand on her arm. "I'm not afraid!"

Zillah lifted her large dark eyes to his.

"Those rings?" she said. "You'll be able to account for them? The police, oh, I'm so anxious about you!"

"The rings are mine!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't matter what the police say or think, or do, either—at least, it shan't matter. And—you're not to be anxious I've got a good friend coming from Scotland—Melky told you I'd had two lots of good news tonight, didn't he?"

A moment later Lauriston was in the street—conscious that, without a word spoken between them, he and Zillah had kissed each other. He went away with a feeling of exaltation—and he only laughed when he saw a man detach himself from a group on the opposite side of the street and saunter slowly after him. Let the police shadow him—watch his lodgings all night, if they pleased—he had something else to think of. And presently, not even troubling to look out of his window to see if there was a watcher there, he went to bed, to dream of Zillah's dark eyes.

But when morning came, and Lauriston realized that a fateful day was before him, his thoughts were not quite so rosy. He drew up his blind—there, certainly was a man pacing the opposite sidewalk. Evidently, he was not to escape surveillance; the official eye was on him! Supposing, before the day was out, the official hand was on him, too?

He turned from the window as he heard his newspaper thrust under his door. He had only one luxury—a copy of the *Times* every morning. It was a three-penny *Times* in those days, but he had always managed to find his weekly eighteenpence for it. He picked it up now, and carelessly glanced at its front page as he was about to lay it aside. The next moment he was eagerly reading a prominent advertisement:

“Lost in a Holborn to Chapel Street Omnibus, about 4 o'clock yesterday afternoon, a Spanish manuscript, bound in old crimson morocco. Whoever has found the same will be most handsomely rewarded on bringing it to Spencer Levendale, Esq., M.P., 591, Sussex Square, W.”

Lauriston read this twice over—and putting the paper in his pocket, finished his dressing and went straight to the police-station.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

Melky Rubinstein came out of the side-passage by Multenius's shop as Lauriston neared it; he, too, had a newspaper bulging from his coat pocket, and at sight of Lauriston he pulled it out and waved it excitedly.

"What'd I tell you, mister?" exclaimed Melky, as Lauriston joined him, the shadowing plain-clothes man in his rear. "D'ye see this?" He pointed to an advertisement in his own paper, which he had marked with blue pencil. "There y'are, Mr. Lauriston!—that identical old book what's inside the parlour—advertised for—handsome reward, too, in the *Daily Telegraph*! Didn't I say we'd hear more of it?"

Lauriston pulled out the *Times* and indicated the Personal Column.

"It's there, too," he said. "This man, Mr. Levendale, is evidently very anxious to recover his book. And he's lost no time in advertising for it, either! But—however did it get to Multenius's?"

"Mister!" said Melky, solemnly. "We'll have to speak to the police—now. There's going to be a fine clue in that there book. I didn't mean to say nothing to the police about it, just yet, but after this here advertisement, t'ain't no use keeping the thing to ourselves. Come on round to the police-station."

"That's just where I was going," replied Lauriston. "Let's get hold of Ayscough."

Ayscough was standing just inside the police-station when they went up the steps; he, too, had a newspaper in his hands, and at sight of them he beckoned them to follow him into an office in which two or three other police officials were talking. He led Lauriston and Melky aside.

"I say!" he said. "Here's a curious thing! That book we noticed on the table in Multenius's back room last night—that finely bound book—it's advertised for in the *Daily Mail*—handsome reward offered."

"Yes, and in the *Times*, too—and in the *Daily Telegraph*," said Lauriston. "Here you are—just the same advertisement. It's very evident the owner's pretty keen about getting it back."

Ayscough glanced at the two newspapers, and then beckoned to a constable who was standing near the door.

"Jim!" he said, as the man came up. "Just slip across to the newsagent's over there and get me the *News*, the *Chronicle*, the *Standard*, the *Morning Post*. If the owner's as keen as all that," he added, turning back to Lauriston, "he'll have put that advertisement in all the morning papers, and I'd like to make sure. What's known about that book at the shop?" he asked, glancing at Melky. "Does your cousin know anything?"

Melky's face assumed its most solemn expression.

"Mister!" he said earnestly. "There ain't nothing known at the shop about that there book, except this here. It wasn't there when my cousin Zillah left the old man

alone at a quarter to five yesterday afternoon. It was there when this here gentleman found the old man. But it hadn't been pledged, nor yet sold, Mr. Ayscough—There'd ha' been an entry in the books if it had been taken in pawn, or bought across the counter—and there's no entry. Now then—who'd left it there?"

Another official had come up to the group—one of the men who had questioned Lauriston the night before. He turned to Lauriston as Melky finished.

"You don't know anything about this book?" he asked.

"Nothing—except that Mr. Ayscough and I saw it lying on the table in the back room, close by that tray of rings," replied Lauriston. "I was attracted by the binding, of course."

"Where's the book, now?" asked the official.

"Put safe away, mister," replied Melky. "It's all right. But this here gentleman what's advertising for it—"

Just then the constable returned with several newspapers and handed them over to Ayscough, who immediately laid them on a desk and turned to the advertisements, while the others crowded round him.

"In every one of 'em," exclaimed Ayscough, a moment later. "Word for word, in every morning newspaper in London! He must have sent that advertisement round to all the offices last night. And you'll notice," he added, turning to the other official, "that this Mr. Levendale only lost this book about four o'clock yesterday afternoon: therefore, it must have been taken to Multenius's shop between then and when we saw it there."

"The old man may have found it in the 'bus," sug-

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gested a third police officer who had come up. "Looks as if he had."

"No, mister," said Melky firmly. "Mr. Multenius wasn't out of the shop at all yesterday afternoon—I've made sure o' that fact from my cousin. He didn't find no book, gentlemen. It was brought there."

Ayscough picked up one of the papers and turned to Melky and Lauriston.

"Here!" he said. "We'll soon get some light on this. You two come with me—we'll step round to Mr. Levendale."

Ten minutes later, the three found themselves at the door of one of the biggest houses in Sussex Square; a moment more and they were being ushered within by a footman who looked at them with stolid curiosity. Lauriston gained a general impression of great wealth and luxury, soft carpets, fine pictures, all the belongings of a very rich man's house—then he and his companions were ushered into a large room, half study, half library, wherein, at a massive, handsomely carved desk, littered with books and papers, sat a middle-aged, keen-eyed man, who looked quietly up from his writing-pad at his visitors.

"S'elp me!—one of ourselves!" whispered Melky Rubinstein at Lauriston's elbow. "Twig him!"

Lauriston was quick enough of comprehension and observation to know what Melky meant. Mr. Spencer Levendale was certainly a Jew. His dark hair and beard, his large dark eyes, the olive tint of his complexion, the lines of his nose and lips all betrayed his Semitic origin.

He was evidently a man of position and of character; a quiet-mannered, self-possessed man of business, not given to wasting words. He glanced at the card which Ayscough had sent in, and turned to him with one word.

“Well?”

Ayscough went straight to the point.

“I called, Mr. Levendale, about that advertisement of yours which appears in all this morning’s newspapers,” he said. “I may as well tell you that that book of yours was found yesterday afternoon, under strange circumstances. Mr. Daniel Multenius, the jeweller and pawn-broker, of Praed Street—perhaps you know him, sir?”

“Not at all!” answered Levendale. “Never heard of him.”

“He was well known in this part of the town,” remarked Ayscough, quietly. “Well, sir—Mr. Multenius was found dead in his back-parlour yesterday afternoon, about five-thirty, by this young man, Mr. Lauriston, who happened to look in there, and I myself was on the spot a few minutes later. Your book—for it’s certainly the same—was lying on the table in the parlour. Now, this other young man, Mr. Rubinstein, is a relation of Mr. Multenius’s—from enquiries he’s made, Mr. Levendale, it’s a fact that the book was neither pawned nor sold at Multenius’s, though it must certainly have been brought there between the time you lost it and the time we found the old gentleman lying dead. Now, we—the police—want to know how it came there. And so—I’ve come round to you. What can you tell me, sir?”

Levendale, who had listened to Ayscough with great—

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and, as it seemed to Lauriston, with very watchful—attention, pushed aside a letter he was writing, and looked from one to the other of his callers.

“Where is my book?” he asked.

“It’s all right—all safe, mister,” said Melky. “It’s locked up in a cupboard, in the parlour where it was found, and the key’s in my pocket.”

Levendale turned to the detective, glancing again at Ayscough’s card.

“All I can tell you, sergeant,” he said, “is—practically—what I’ve told the public in my advertisement. Of course, I can supplement it a bit. The book is a very valuable one—you see,” he went on, with a careless wave of his hand towards his book-shelves. “I’m something of a collector of rare books. I bought this particular book yesterday afternoon, at a well-known dealer’s in High Holborn. Soon after buying it, I got into a Cricklewood omnibus, which I left at Chapel Street—at the corner of Praed Street, as a matter of fact: I wished to make a call at the Great Western Hotel. It was not till I made that call that I found I’d left the book in the ’bus—I was thinking hard about a business matter—I’d placed the book in a corner behind me—and, of course, I’d forgotten it, valuable though it is. And so, later on, after telephoning to the omnibus people, who’d heard nothing, I sent that advertisement round to all the morning papers. I’m very glad to hear of it—and I shall be pleased to reward you,” he concluded, turning to Melky. “Handsomely!—as I promised.”

But Melky made no sign of gratitude or pleasure. He

was eyeing the rich man before him in inquisitive fashion.

"Mister!" he said suddenly. "I'd like to ask you a question."

Levendale frowned a little.

"Well?" he asked brusquely. "What is it?"

"This here," replied Melky. "Was that there book wrapped up? Was it brown-papered, now, when you left it?"

It seemed to Lauriston that Levendale was somewhat taken aback. But if he was, it was only for a second: his answer, then, came promptly enough.

"No, it was not," he said. "I carried it away from the shop where I bought it—just as it was. Why do you ask?"

"It's a very fine-bound book," remarked Melky. "I should ha' thought, now, that if it had been left in a 'bus, the conductor would ha' noticed it, quick."

"So should I," said Levendale. "Anything else?" he added, glancing at Ayscough.

"Well, no, Mr. Levendale, thank you," replied the detective. "At least not just now. But—the fact is, Mr. Multenius appears to have come to his death by violence—and I want to know if whoever took your book into his shop had anything to do with it."

"Ah!—however, I can't tell you any more," said Levendale. "Please see that my book's taken great care of and returned to me, sergeant. Good-morning."

Outside, Ayscough consulted his watch and looked at his companions.

“Time we were going on to the inquest,” he remarked. “Come on—we’ll step round there together. You’re both wanted, you know.”

“I’ll join you at the Coroner’s court, Mr. Ayscough,” said Melky. “I’ve got a few minutes’ business—shan’t be long.”

He hurried away by a short cut to Praed Street and turned into Mrs. Goldmark’s establishment.

Mrs. Goldmark herself was still ministering to Zillah, but the young woman whom Melky had seen the night before was in charge. Melky drew her aside.

“I say!” he said, with an air of great mystery. “A word with you, miss!—private, between you and me. Can you tell me what like was that fellow what you believed to ha’ lost that there cuff stud you showed me in Mrs. Goldmark’s desk?—you know?”

“Yes!” answered the young woman promptly. “Tall—dark—clean-shaved—very brown—looked like one of those Colonials that you see sometimes—wore a slouch hat.”

“Not a word to nobody!” warned Melky, more mysteriously than ever. And nodding his head with great solemnity, he left the eating-house, and hurried away to the Coroner’s Court.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE INQUEST

Until he and Ayscough walked into this particular one, Lauriston had never been in a Coroner's Court in his life. He knew very little about what went on in such places. He was aware that the office of Coroner is of exceeding antiquity; that when any person meets his or her death under suspicious circumstances an enquiry into those circumstances is held by a Coroner, who has a jury of twelve men to assist him in his duties: but what Coroner and jury did, what the procedure of these courts was, he did not know. It surprised him, accordingly, to find himself in a hall which had all the outward appearance of a court of justice—a raised seat; on a sort of dais, for the Coroner; a box for the jury; a table for officials and legal gentlemen; a stand for witnesses, and accommodation for the general public. Clearly, it was evident that when any one died as poor old Daniel Multenius had died, the law took good care that everybody should know everything about it, and that whatever mystery there was should be thoroughly investigated.

The general public, however, had not as yet come to be greatly interested in the death of Daniel Multenius. Up to that moment the affair was known to few people beyond the police, the relations of the dead man, and his immediate neighbours in Praed Street. Consequently, be-

yond the interested few, there was no great assemblage in the court that morning. A reporter or two, each with his note-book, lounged at the end of the table on the chance of getting some good copy out of whatever might turn up; some of the police officials whom Lauriston had already seen stood chatting with the police surgeon and a sharp-eyed legal looking man, who was attended by a clerk; outside the open door, a group of men, evidently tradesmen and householders of the district, hung about, looking as if they would be glad to get back to their businesses and occupations. Melky, coming in a few minutes after Lauriston had arrived, and sitting down by him, nudged his elbow as he pointed to these individuals.

"There's the fellows what sits on the jury, mister!" whispered Melky. "Half-a-crown each they gets for the job—and a nice mess they makes of it, sometimes. They've the power to send a man for trial for his life, has them chaps—all depends on their verdict. But lor' bless yer!—they takes their tip from the Coroner—he's the fellow what you've got to watch."

Then Melky looked around more narrowly, and suddenly espied the legal-looking man who was talking to the police. He dug his elbow into Lauriston.

"Mister!" he whispered. "You be careful what you say when you get into that there witness-box. See that man there, a-talking to the detectives?—him with the gold nippers on his blooming sharp nose? That's Mr. Par-minter!—I knows him, well enough. He's a lawyer chap, what the police gets when there's a case o' this sort, to ask questions of the witnesses, d'ye see? Watch him, Mr. Lauriston, if he starts a-questioning you!—he's the

sort that can get a tale out of a dead cod-fish—s'elp me, he is! He's a terror, he is!—the Coroner ain't in it with him—he's a good sort, the Coroner, but Parminter—Lord love us! ain't I heard him turn witnesses inside out—not half! And here is the Coroner."

Lauriston almost forgot that he was an important witness, and was tempted to consider himself nothing but a spectator as he sat and witnessed the formal opening of the Court, the swearing-in of the twelve jurymen, all looking intensely bored, and the preliminaries which prefaced the actual setting-to-work of the morning's business. But at last, after some opening remarks from the Coroner, who said that the late Mr. Daniel Multenius was a well-known and much respected tradesman of the neighbourhood, that they were all sorry to hear of his sudden death, and that there were circumstances about it which necessitated a careful investigation, the business began—and Lauriston, who, for professional purposes, had heard a good many legal cases, saw, almost at once, that the police, through the redoubtable Mr. Parminter, now seated with his clerk at the table, had carefully arranged the presenting of evidence on a plan and system of their own, all of which, so it became apparent to him, was intended to either incriminate himself, or throw considerable suspicion upon him. His interest began to assume a personal complexion.

The story of the circumstances of Daniel Multenius's death, as unfolded in the witness-box into which one person went after another, appeared to be the fairly plain one—looked at from one point of view: there was a certain fascination in its unfolding. It began with

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Melky, who was first called—to identify the deceased, to answer a few general questions about him, and to state that when he last saw him, a few hours before his death, he was in his usual good health: as good, at any rate, as a man of his years—seventy-five—who was certainly growing feeble, could expect to be in. Nothing much was asked of Melky, and nothing beyond bare facts volunteered by him: the astute Mr. Parminter left him alone. A more important witness was the police-surgeon, who testified that the deceased had been dead twenty minutes when he was called to him, that he had without doubt been violently assaulted, having been savagely seized by the throat and by the left arm, on both of which significant marks were plainly visible, and that the cause of death was shock following immediately on this undoubted violence. It was evident, said this witness, that the old man was feeble, and that he suffered from a weak heart: such an attack as that which he had described would be sufficient to cause death, almost instantly.

“So it is a case of murder!” muttered Melky, who had gone back to sit by Lauriston. “That’s what the police is leading up to. Be careful, mister!”

But there were three witnesses to call before Lauriston was called upon. It was becoming a mystery to him that his evidence was kept back so long—he had been the first person to find the old man’s dead body, and it seemed, to his thinking, that he ought to have been called at a very early stage of the proceedings. He was about to whisper his convictions on this point to Melky,

when a door was opened and Zillah was escorted in by Ayscough, and led to the witness-box.

Zillah had already assumed the garments of mourning for her grandfather. She was obviously distressed at being called to give evidence, and the Coroner made her task as brief as possible. It was—at that stage—little that he wanted to know. And Zillah told little. She had gone out to do some shopping, at half-past-four on the previous afternoon. She left her grandfather alone. He was then quite well. He was in the front shop, doing nothing in particular. She was away about an hour, when she returned to find Detective-Sergeant Ayscough, whom she knew, and Mr. Lauriston, whom she also knew, in the shop, and her grandfather dead in the parlour behind. At this stage of her evidence, the Coroner remarked that he did not wish to ask Zillah any further questions just then, but he asked her to remain in court. Mrs. Goldmark had followed her, and she and Zillah sat down near Melky and Lauriston—and Lauriston half believed that his own turn would now come.

But Ayscough was next called—to give a brief, bald, matter-of-fact statement of what he knew. He had gone to see Mr. Multenius on a business affair—he was making enquiries about a stolen article which was believed to have been pledged in the Edgware Road district. He told how Lauriston ran into him as he entered the shop; what Lauriston said to him; what he himself saw and observed; what happened afterwards. It was a plain and practical account, with no indication

of surprise, bias, or theory—and nobody asked the detective any questions arising out of it.

“Ain’t nobody but you to call, now, mister,” whispered Melky. “Mind your p’s and q’s about them blooming rings—and watch that Parminter!”

But Melky was mistaken—the official eye did not turn upon Lauriston but, upon the public benches of the court, as if it were seeking some person there.

“There is a witness who has volunteered a statement to the police,” said the Coroner. “I understand it is highly important. We had better hear him at this point. Benjamin Hollinshaw!”

Melky uttered a curious groan, and glanced at Lauriston.

“Fellow what has a shop right opposite!” he whispered. “S’elp me!—what’s he got to say about it?”

Benjamin Hollinshaw came forward. He was a rather young, rather self-confident, self-important sort of person, who strode up to the witness-box as if he had been doing things of importance and moment all his life, and was taking it quite as a matter of course that he should do another. He took the oath and faced the court with something of an air, as much as to imply that upon what he was about to say more depended than any one could conceive. Invited to tell what he knew, he told his story, obviously enjoying the telling of it. He was a tradesman in Praed Street: a dealer in second-hand clothing, to be exact; been there many years, in succession to his father. He remembered yesterday afternoon, of course. About half-past-five o’clock he was standing at the door of his shop. It was

directly facing Daniel Multenius's shop door. The darkness had already come on, and there was also a bit of a fog in the street: not much, but hazy, as it were. Daniel Multenius's window was lighted, but the light was confined to a couple of gas-jets. There was a light in the projecting sign over the side entrance to the pawnshop, down the passage. For the first few minutes while he stood at his door, looking across to Multenius's, he did not see any one enter or leave that establishment. But he then saw a young man come along, from the Edgware Road direction, whose conduct rather struck him. The young man, after sauntering past Multenius's shop, paused, turned, and proceeded to peer in through the top panel of the front door. He looked in once or twice in that way. Then he went to the far end of the window and looked inside in the same prying fashion, as if he wanted to find out who was within. He went to various parts of the window, as if endeavouring to look inside. Finally, he stepped down the side-passage and entered the door which led to the compartments into which people turned who took things to pledge. He, Hollinshaw, remained at his shop door for some minutes after that—in fact, until the last witness came along. He saw Ayscough enter Multenius's front door and immediately pause—then the door was shut, and he himself went back into his own shop, his wife just then calling him to tea.

“You saw the young man you speak of quite clearly?” asked the Coroner.

“As clearly as I see you, sir,” replied the witness

“Do you see him here?”

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Hollinshaw turned instantly and pointed to Lauriston.

"That's the young man, sir," he answered, with confidence.

Amidst a general craning of necks, Melky whispered to Lauriston.

"You'd ought to ha' had a lawyer, mister!" he said. "S'elp me, I'm a blooming fool for not thinking of it! Be careful—the Coroner's a-looking at you!"

As a matter of fact, every person in the court was staring at Lauriston, and presently the Coroner addressed him.

"Do you wish to ask this witness any questions?" he enquired.

Lauriston rose to his feet.

"No!" he replied. "What he says is quite correct. That is, as regards myself."

The Coroner hesitated a moment; then he motioned to Hollinshaw to leave the box, and once more turned to Lauriston.

"We will have your evidence now," he said. "And—let me warn you that there is no obligation on you to say anything which would seem to incriminate you."

CHAPTER NINE

WHOSE WERE THOSE RINGS?

Paying no attention to another attempted murmur of advice from Melky, who seemed to be on pins and needles, Lauriston at once jumped to his feet and strode to the witness-box. The women in the public seats glanced at him with admiring interest—such a fine-looking young fellow, whispered one sentimental lady to another, to have set about a poor old gentleman like Mr. Multenius! And everybody else, from the Coroner to the newspaper reporter—who was beginning to think he would get some good copy, after all, that morning—regarded him with attention. Here, at any rate, was the one witness who had actually found the pawnbroker's dead body.

Lauriston, his colour heightened a little under all this attention, answered the preliminary questions readily enough. His name was Andrew Carruthers Lauriston. His age—nearly twenty-two. He was a native of Peebles, in Scotland—the only son of the late Andrew Lauriston. His father was a minister of the Free Church. His mother was dead, too. He himself had come to London about two years ago—just after his mother's death. For the past few weeks he had lodged with Mrs. Flitwick, in Star Street—that was his present address. He was a writer of fiction—stories and novels. He had heard all the evidence already given, including

that of the last witness, Hollinshaw. All that Hollinshaw had said was quite true. It was quite true that he had gone to Multenius's pawnshop about five-thirty of the previous afternoon, on his own business. He had looked in through both doors and window before entering the side-door: he wanted to know who was in the shop—whether it was Mr. Multenius, or his granddaughter. He wanted to know that for a simple reason—he had never done business with Mr. Multenius, never even seen him that he remembered, but he had had one transaction with Miss Wildrose, and he wished, if possible, to do his business with her. As a matter of fact he saw nobody inside the shop when he looked in through the front door and the window—so he went round to the side-entrance.

All this had come in answer to questions put by the Coroner—who now paused and looked at Lauriston not unkindly.

“I daresay you are already aware that there is, or may be, some amount of suspicious circumstances attaching to your visit to this place yesterday afternoon,” he said. “Do you care to tell the court—in your own way—precisely what took place, what you discovered, after you entered the pawnshop?”

“That's exactly what I wish to do,” answered Lauriston, readily. “I've already told it, more than once, to the police and Mr. Multenius's relatives—I'll tell it again, as plainly and briefly as I can. I went into one of the compartments just within the side-door of the place. I saw no one, and heard no one. I rapped on the counter—nobody came. So I looked round the

partition into the front shop. There was no one there. Then I looked round the other partition into the back parlour, the door of which was wide open. I at once saw an old man whom I took to be Mr. Multenius. He was lying on the floor—his feet were towards the open door, and his head on the hearth-rug, near the fender. I immediately jumped over the counter, and went into the parlour. I saw at once that he was dead—and almost immediately I hurried to the front door, to summon assistance. At the door I ran into Mr. Ayscough, who was entering as I opened the door. I at once told him of what I had found. That is the plain truth as to all I know of the matter.”

“You heard nothing of any person in or about the shop when you entered?” asked the Coroner.

“Nothing!” replied Lauriston. “It was all perfectly quiet.”

“What had you gone there to do?”

“To borrow some money—on two rings.”

“Your own property?”

“My own property!”

“Had you been there before, on any errand of that sort?”

“Only once.”

“When was that?”

“Last week,” answered Lauriston. “I pawned my watch there.”

“You have, in fact, been short of money?”

“Yes. But only temporarily—I was expecting money.”

“I hope it has since arrived,” said the Coroner.

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"Mr. Ayscough was with me when it did arrive," replied Lauriston, glancing at the detective. "We found it—two letters—at my lodgings when he walked round there with me after what I have just told you of."

"You had done your business on that previous occasion with the grand-daughter?" asked the Coroner. "You had not seen the old man, then?"

"I never to my knowledge—saw Mr. Multenius till I found him lying dead in his own parlour," answered Lauriston.

The Coroner turned from the witness, and glanced towards the table at which Mr. Parminter and the police officials sat. And Mr. Parminter slowly rose and looked at Lauriston, and put his first question—in a quiet, almost suave voice, as if he and the witness were going to have a pleasant and friendly little talk together.

"So your ambition is to be a writer of fiction?" he asked.

"I am a writer of fiction!" replied Lauriston.

Mr. Parminter pulled out a snuff-box and helped himself to a pinch.

"Have you published much?" he enquired, drily.

"Two or three stories—short stories."

"Did they bring in much money?"

"Five pounds each."

"Have you done anything else for a living but that since you came to London two years ago?"

"No, I haven't!"

"How much have you earned by your pen since you came, now?"

"About thirty pounds."

"Thirty pounds in two years. What have you lived on, then?"

"I had money of my own," replied Lauriston. "I had two hundred pounds when I left home."

"And that gave out—when?" demanded Mr. Parminter.

"Last week."

"And so—you took your watch to the pawnshop. And—yesterday—your expected money not having arrived, you were obliged to visit the pawnshop again? Taking with you, you said just now, two rings—your own property. Am I correct?"

"Quite correct—two rings—my own property."

Mr. Parminter turned and spoke to a police official, who, lifting aside a sheet of brown paper which lay before him, revealed the tray of rings which Lauriston and Ayscough had found on the table in Multenius's parlour. At the same time, Mr. Parminter, lifting his papers, revealed Lauriston's rings. He picked them up, laid them on the palm of his hand, and held them towards the witness.

"Are these the rings you took to the pawnshop?" he asked.

"Yes!" replied Lauriston. "They were my mother's."

Mr. Parminter indicated the tray.

"Did you see this tray lying in the parlour in which you found the dead man?" he enquired.

"I did."

"Did it strike you that your own rings were remarkably like the rings in this tray?"

"No, it did not," answered Lauriston. "I know nothing about rings."

Mr. Parminter quietly passed the tray of rings to the Coroner, with Lauriston's rings lying on a sheet of paper.

"Perhaps you will examine these things and direct the attention of the jurymen to them?" he said, and turned to the witness-box again. "I want to ask you a very particular question," he continued. "You had better consider it well before answering it—it is more important—to you—than may appear at first hearing. Can you bring any satisfactory proof that those two rings which you claim to be yours, really are yours?"

There followed on that a dead silence in court. People had been coming in since the proceedings had opened, and the place was now packed to the door. Every eye was turned on Lauriston as he stood in the witness-box, evidently thinking deeply. And in two pairs of eyes there was deep anxiety: Melky was nervous and fidgety; Zillah was palpably greatly concerned. But Lauriston looked at neither—and he finally turned to Mr. Parminter with a candid glance.

"The rings are mine," he answered. "But—I don't know how I can prove that they are!"

A suppressed murmur ran round the court—in the middle of it, the Coroner handed the rings to a police official and motioned him to show them to the jurymen. And Mr. Parminter's suave voice was heard again.

"You can't prove that they are yours."

"May I explain?" asked Lauriston. "Very well—

there may be people, old friends, who have seen those two rings in my mother's possession. But I don't know where to find such people. If it's necessary, I can try."

"I should certainly try, if I were you," observed Mr. Parminter, drily. "Now, when did those two rings come into your possession?"

"When my mother died," replied Lauriston.

"Where have you kept them?"

"Locked up in my trunk."

"Have you ever, at any time, or any occasion, shown them to any person? Think!"

"No," answered Lauriston. "I can't say that I ever have."

"Not even at the time of your mother's death?"

"No! I took possession, of course, of all her effects. I don't remember showing the rings to anybody."

"You kept them in your trunk until you took them out to raise money on them?"

"Yes—that's so," admitted Lauriston.

"How much money had you—in the world—when you went to the pawnshop yesterday afternoon?" demanded Mr. Parminter, with a sudden keen glance.

Lauriston flushed scarlet.

"If you insist on knowing," he said. "I'd just nothing."

There was another murmur in court—of pity from the sentimental ladies in the public seats, who, being well acquainted with the pawnshops themselves, and with the necessities which drove them there were experienc-

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ing much fellow-feeling for the poor young man in the witness-box. But Lauriston suddenly smiled—triumphantly.

“All the same,” he added, glancing at Mr. Parminter. “I’d forty pounds, in my letters, less than an hour afterwards. Ayscough knows that!”

Mr. Parminter paid no attention to this remark. He had been whispering to the police inspector, and now he turned to the Coroner.

“I should like this witness to stand down for a few minutes, sir,” he said. “I wish to have Miss Wildrose recalled.”

The Coroner gently motioned Zillah to go back to the witness-box.

CHAPTER TEN

MELKY INTERVENES

Zillah had listened to Lauriston's answers to Mr. Parminter's searching questions with an anxiety which was obvious to those who sat near her. The signs of that anxiety were redoubled as she walked slowly to the box, and the glance she threw at the Coroner was almost appealing. But the Coroner was looking at his notes, and Zillah was obliged to turn to Mr. Parminter, whose accents became more mellifluous than ever as he addressed her; Mr. Parminter, indeed, confronting Zillah might have been taken for a kindly benevolent gentleman whose sole object was to administer condolence and comfort. Few people in court, however, failed to see the meaning of the questions which he began to put in the suavest and softest of tones.

"I believe you assisted your late grandfather in his business?" suggested Mr. Parminter.

"Just so! Now, how long had you assisted him in that way?"

"Ever since I left school—three years ago," replied Zillah.

"Three years—to be sure! And I believe you had resided with him for some years before that?"

"Ever since I was a little girl," admitted Zillah.

"In fact, the late Mr. Multenius brought you up?"

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Just so!—therefore, of course, you would have some acquaintance with his business before you left school?”

“Yes—he taught me a good deal about it.”

“You were always about the place, of course—yes? And I may take it that you gradually got a good deal of knowledge about the articles with which your grandfather had to deal? To be sure—thank you. In fact, you are entitled to regard yourself as something of an expert in precious stones and metals?”

“I know a good deal about them,” replied Zillah.

“You could tell the value of a thing as accurately as your grandfather?”

“Ordinary things—yes.”

“And you were very well acquainted with your grandfather’s stock?”

“Yes.”

Mr. Parminter mentioned the official who had charge of it to place the tray of rings on the ledge of the witness-box.

“Oblige me by looking at that tray and the contents,” he said. “You recognize it, of course? Just so. Now, do you know where that tray was when you went out, leaving your grandfather alone, yesterday afternoon?”

“Yes,” replied Zillah, unhesitatingly. “On the table in the back-parlour—where I saw it when I came in. My grandfather had taken it out of the front window, so that he could polish the rings.”

“Do you know how many rings it contained?”

“No. Perhaps twenty-five or thirty.”

“They are, I see, laid loosely in the tray, which is velvet-lined. They were always left like that? Just so.

And you don't know how many there were—nor how many there should be there, now? As a matter of fact, there are twenty-seven rings there—you can't say that is the right number?"

"No," answered Zillah, "and my grandfather couldn't have said, either. A ring might be dropped into that tray—or a ring taken out. They are all old rings."

"But—valuable?" suggested Mr. Parminter.

"Some—yes. Others are not very valuable."

"Now what do you mean by that word valuable? What, for instance, is the value of the least valuable ring there, and what is that of the most valuable?"

Zillah glanced almost indifferently at the tray before her.

"Some of these rings are worth no more than five pounds," she replied. "Some—a few—are worth twenty to thirty pounds; one or two are worth more."

"And—they are all old?"

"They are all of old-fashioned workmanship," said Zillah. "Made a good many years ago, all of them. The diamonds, or pearls, are all right, of course."

Mr. Parminter handed over the half-sheet of paper on which Lauriston's rings had been exhibited to the Coroner and the jurymen.

"Look at those rings, if you please," he said quietly. "Are they of the same sort, the same class, of rings as those in the tray?"

"Yes," admitted Zillah. "Something the same."

"What is the value of those rings—separately?" enquired Mr. Parminter. "Please give us your professional opinion."

Zillah bent over the two rings for a while, turning them about.

"This is worth about thirty, and that about fifty pounds," she replied at last.

"In other words, these two rings are similar in style and value to the best rings in that tray?"

"Yes."

"Do you recognize those two rings?"

"No—not at all."

Mr. Parminter paused a moment, and caught the jury's attention with a sharp glance of his eye before he turned again to the witness.

"Could you have recognized any of the rings in that tray?" he asked.

"No!" said Zillah. "I could not."

"Then you could not possibly say one way or another, if those rings were taken out of that tray?"

"No!"

"The fact is that all those rings—the two on the half-sheet of notepaper, and twenty-seven on the tray—are all of the same class as regards age and style—all very much of a muchness?"

"Yes," admitted Zillah.

"And you can't—you are on your oath remember!—you can't definitely say that those two rings were not picked up from that tray, amongst the others?"

"No," replied Zillah. "But I can't say that they were! And—I don't believe they were. I don't believe they were our rings!"

Mr. Parminter smiled quietly and again swept the interested jurymen with his quick glance.

Then he turned to Zillah with another set of questions.

"How long have you known the last witness—Andrew Lauriston?" he enquired.

"Since one day last week," replied Zillah.

She had flushed at the mention of Lauriston's name, and Mr. Parminter was quick to see it.

"How did you get to know him?" he continued.

"By his coming to the shop—on business."

"To pawn his watch, I believe?"

"Yes."

"You attended to him?"

"Yes."

"You had never seen him before?"

"No."

"Ever seen him since?"

Zillah hesitated for a moment.

"I saw him—accidentally—in Kensington Gardens, on Sunday," she answered at last.

"Have any conversation with him?"

"Yes," admitted Zillah.

"About—pawnbroking?"

"No!" retorted Zillah. "About his work—writing."

"Did he tell you he was very hard up?"

"I knew that!" said Zillah. "Hadn't he pawned his watch?"

"Perhaps—you seem to be a very good business woman—perhaps you gave him some advice?"

"Yes, I did! I advised him, as long as he'd anything on which he could raise money, not to let himself go without money in his pocket."

"Excellent advice!" said Mr. Parminter, with a smile.

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He leaned forward, looking at his witness more earnestly. "Now, did Lauriston, on Sunday, or when you saw him before, ever mention to you that he possessed two rings of some value?"

"No," replied Zillah.

Mr. Parminter paused, hesitated, suddenly bowed to the Coroner, and dropping back into his seat, pulled out his snuff-box. And the Coroner, motioning Zillah to leave the witness-box, interrupted Mr. Parminter in the midst of a pinch of snuff.

"I think it will be best to adjourn at this stage," he said. "It is obvious that we can't finish this today." He turned to the jurymen. "I propose to adjourn this enquiry for a week, gentlemen," he went on. "In the meantime—"

His attention was suddenly arrested by Melky Rubinstein, who, after much uneasiness and fidgeting, rose from his seat and made his way to the foot of the table, manifestly desiring to speak.

"What is it?" asked the Coroner. "Who are you? Oh!—the witness who identified the body. Yes?"

"Mr. Coroner!" said Melky, in his most solemn tones. "This here inquest ain't being conducted right, sir! I don't mean by you—but these here gentlemen, the police, and Mr. Parminter there, is going off on a wrong scent. I know what they're after, and they're wrong! They're suppressing evidence, Mr. Coroner." Melky turned on Ayscough. "What about the clue o' this here old book?" he demanded. "Why ain't you bringing that forward? I'm the late Daniel Multenius's nearest male relative, and I say that clue's a deal more important nor

what we've been hearing all the morning. What about that book, now, Mr. Ayscough? Come on!—what about it!—and its owner?"

"What is this?" demanded the Coroner. "If there is anything—"

"Anything, sir!" exclaimed Melky. "There's just this—between the time that my cousin there, Miss Zillah Wildrose left the old man alive, and the time when Mr. Lauriston found him dead, somebody came into the shop as left a valuable book behind him on the parlour table, which book, according to all the advertisements in the morning papers, is the property of Mr. Spencer Levendale, the Member of Parliament, as lives in Sussex Square. Why ain't that matter brought up? Why ain't Mr. Levendale brought here? I ask you, Mr. Coroner, to have it seen into! There's more behind it—"

The Coroner held up a hand and beckoned the police inspector and Mr. Parminter to approach his desk; a moment later, Ayscough was summoned. And Lauriston, watching the result of this conference, was quickly aware that the Coroner was not particularly pleased; he suddenly turned on the inspector with a question which was heard by every one in court.

"Why was not the matter of the book put before the Court at first?" he demanded. "It seems to me that there may be a most important clue in it. The fact of the book's having been found should most certainly have been mentioned, at once. I shall adjourn for a week, from today, and you will produce the book and bring Mr. Spencer Levendale here as a witness. This day week, gentlemen!"

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Melky Rubinstein turned, whispered a hurried word to Zillah and Mrs. Goldmark, and then, seizing Lauriston by the elbow, drew him quickly away from the court.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BACK DOOR

Once outside in the street, Melky turned down the nearest side-street, motioning Lauriston to follow him. Before they had gone many yards he edged himself close to his companion's side, at the same time throwing a cautious glance over his own shoulder.

"There's one o' them blooming detectives after us!" said Melky. "But that's just what's to be expected, mister!—they'll never let you out o' their sight until one of two things happen!"

"What things?" asked Lauriston.

"Either you'll have to prove, beyond all doubt, that them rings is yours, and was your poor mother's before you," answered Melky, "or we shall have to put a hand on the chap that scragged my uncle. That's a fact! Mister!—will you put your trust and confidence in me, and do what I tell you? It's for your own good."

"I don't know that I could do better," responded Lauriston, after a moment's thought. "You're a right good fellow, Melky—I'm sure of that! What do you want me to do?"

Melky pulled out a handsome gold watch and consulted it.

"It's dinner-time," he said. "Come round to Mrs. Goldmark's and get some grub. I'll tell you what to

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do while we're eating. I've been thinking things over while that there Parminter was badgering poor Zillah, and s'elp me, there only is one thing for you to do, and you'd best to do it sharp! But come on to Praed Street—don't matter if this here chap behind does shadow you—I can get the better of him as easy as I could sell this watch! It 'ud take all the detectives in London to beat me, if I put my mind to it."

They were at Mrs. Goldmark's eating-house in five minutes: Melky, who knew all the ins and outs of that establishment, conducted Lauriston into an inner room, and to a corner wherein there was comparative privacy, and summoned a waitress. Not until he and his companion were half way through their meal did he refer to the business which was in his thoughts: then he leaned close to Lauriston and began to talk.

"Mister!" he whispered. "Where do you come from?"

"Peebles," answered Lauriston. "You heard me tell them so, in that court."

"I'm no scholar," said Melky. "I ain't no idea where Peebles is, except that it's in Scotland. Is it far into that country, or where is it?"

"Not far across the Border," replied Lauriston.

"Get there in a few hours, I reckon?" asked Melky. "You could? Very well, then, mister, you take my tip—get there! Get there—quick!"

Lauriston laid down his knife and fork and stared.

"Whatever for?" he exclaimed.

"To find somebody—anybody—as can prove that those rings are yours!" answered Melky solemnly and em-

phatically. "Tain't no use denying it—you're in a dangerous position. The police always goes for the straightest and easiest line. Their line was clear enough, just now—Parminter give it away! They've a theory—they always have a theory—and when once police gets a theory, nothing can drive it out o' their heads—their official heads, anyway. What they're saying, and what they'll try to establish, is this here. That you were hard up, down to less than your last penny. You went to Mr. Multenius's—you peeked and peered through the shop window and saw him alone, or, perhaps, saw the place empty. You went in—you grabbed a couple o' rings—he interrupted you—you scragged him! That's their line—and Zillah can't swear that those rings which you claim to be yours aren't her grandfather's, and up to now you can't prove that they're yours and were once your mother's! Mister!—be off to this here Peebles at once—immediate!—and find somebody, some old friend, as can swear that he or she—never mind which—knows them rings to be your property beyond a shadow of doubt! Bring that friend back—bring him if he has to come in an invalid carriage!"

Lauriston was so much struck by Melky's argument and advice that it needed no more explanations to convince him of its wisdom.

"But—how could I get away?" he asked. "There'll be that detective chap hanging about outside—I know I've been shadowed ever since last evening! They'll never let me get away from London, however much I wish. The probability is that if they saw me going to a railway station they'd arrest me."

“My own opinion, mister, after what’s taken place this morning, is that if you stop here, you’ll be arrested before night,” remarked Melky coolly. “I’d lay a tenner on it! But you ain’t going to stop—you must go! There must be somebody in the old spot as can swear that them two rings o’ yours is family property, and you must find ’em and bring ’em, if you value your neck. As to slipping the police, I’ll make that right for you, proper! Now, then, what money have you about you, Mr. Lauriston?”

“Plenty!” answered Lauriston. “Nearly forty pounds—the money I got last night.”

“Will you do exactly what I tell you?” asked Melky, “And do it at once, without any hesitation, any hanging about, any going home to Mother Flitwick’s, or anything o’ that sort?”

“Yes!” replied Lauriston. “I’m so sure you’re right, that I will.”

“Then you listen to me—careful,” said Melky. “See that door in the corner? As soon as you’ve finished that pudding, slip out o’ that door. You’ll find yourself in a little yard. Go out o’ that yard, and you’ll find yourself in a narrow passage. Go straight down the passage, and you’ll come out in Market Street. Go straight down Southwick Street—you know it—to Oxford and Cambridge Terrace, and you’ll see a cab-rank right in front of you. Get into a taxi, and tell the fellow to drive you to Piccadilly Circus. Leave him there—take a turn round so’s he won’t see what you do—then get into another taxi, and drive to St. Pancras Church. Get out

there—and foot it to King's Cross Station. You'll catch the 3.15 for the North easy—and after you're once in it, you're all right. Get to Peebles!—that's the thing! S'elp me, Mr. Lauriston, it's the only thing!"

Five minutes later, there being no one but themselves in the little room, Lauriston gave Melky a hearty grip of the hand, walked out of the door in the corner, and vanished. And Melky, left alone, pulled out his cigarette case, and began to smoke, calmly and quietly. When the waitress came back, he whispered a word or two to her; the waitress nodded with full comprehension—for everybody knew Melky at Goldmark's, and if the waitresses wanted a little jewellery now and then, he let them have it at cost price.

"So you can give me the checks for both," said Melky. "I'll pay 'em."

But Melky let three-quarters of an hour elapse before he went to the desk in the outer shop. He sipped a cup of coffee; he smoked several cigarettes; it was quite a long time before he emerged into Praed Street, buttoning his overcoat. And without appearing to see anything, he at once saw the man who had followed Lauriston and himself from the Coroner's Court. Being almost preternaturally observant, he also saw the man start with surprise—but Melky showed, and felt, no surprise, when the watcher came after him.

"You know me, Mr. Rubinstein," he said, almost apologetically. "You know, of course, we're keeping an eye on that young Scotch fellow—we've got to! He went in there, to Goldmark's, with you? Is he still there?"

“Strikes me you ain’t up to your job!” remarked Melky, coolly. “He went out, three-quarters of an hour ago. Gone home, I should say.”

The man turned away, evidently puzzled, but just as evidently taking Melky’s word. He went off in the direction of Star Street, while Melky strolled along to the pawnbroker’s shop. It was necessary that he should tell his cousin of what he had done.

Mrs. Goldmark was still with Zillah—Melky unfolded his story to the two of them. Zillah heard it with unfeigned relief; Mrs. Goldmark, who, being a young and pretty widow, was inclined to sentiment, regarded Melky with admiration.

“My!—if you ain’t the cute one, Mr. Rubinstein!” she exclaimed, clapping her plump hands. “As for me, now, I wouldn’t have thought of that in a hundred years! But it’s you that’s the quick mind.”

Melky laid a finger to the side of his nose.

“Do you know what, Mrs. Goldmark?” he said. “I ain’t going to let them police fellows put a hand on young Lauriston, not me! I’ve my own ideas about this here business—wait till I put my hand on somebody, see? Don’t it all come out clear to you?—if I find the right man, then there ain’t no more suspicion attaching to this young chap, ain’t it? Oh, I’m no fool, Mrs. Goldmark; don’t you make no mistake!”

“I’m sure!” asserted Mrs. Goldmark. “Yes, indeed—you don’t carry your eyes in your head for nothing, Mr. Rubinstein!”

Zillah, who had listened abstractedly to these compliments, suddenly turned on her cousin.

“What are you going to do then, Melky?” she demanded. “What’s all this business about that book? And what steps are you thinking of taking?”

But Melky rose and, shaking his head, buttoned up his overcoat as if he were buttoning in a multitude of profound secrets.

“What you got to do, just now, Zillah—and Mrs. Goldmark, too,” he answered, “is to keep quiet tongues about what I done with young Lauriston. There ain’t to be a word said! If any o’ them police come round here, asking about him, you don’t know nothing—see? You ain’t seen him since he walked out o’ that court with me—see? Which, of course you ain’t. And as for the rest, you leave that to yours truly!”

“Oh, what it is to have a mind!” exclaimed Mrs. Goldmark. “I ain’t no mind, beyond managing my business!”

“Don’t you show your mind in managing that?” said Melky, admiringly. “What do I always say of you, Mrs. Goldmark? Don’t I always say you’re the smartest business woman in all Paddington? Ain’t that having a mind? Oh, I think you’ve the beautifulest mind, Mrs. Goldmark!”

With this compliment Melky left Mrs. Goldmark and Zillah, and went away to his lodgings. He was aware of a taxi-cab drawn up at Mrs. Flitwick’s door as he went up the street; inside Mrs. Flitwick’s shabby hall he found that good woman talking to a stranger—a well-dressed young gentleman, who was obviously asking questions. Mrs. Flitwick turned to Melky with an air of relief.

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“Perhaps you can tell this gentleman where Mr. Lauriston is, Mr. Rubinstein?” she said. “I ain’t seen him since he went out first thing this morning.”

Melky looked the stranger over—narrowly. Then he silently beckoned him outside the house, and walked him out of earshot.

“You ain’t the friend from Scotland?” asked Melky. “Him what sent the bank-note, last night?”

“Yes!” assented the stranger. “I see you’re aware of that. My name is Purdie—John Purdie. Where is Lauriston? I particularly want to see him.”

Melky tapped the side of his nose, and whispered.

“He’s on his way to where you come from, mister!” he said. “Here!—I know who you are, and you’ll know me in a one minute. Come up to my sitting-room!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FRIEND FROM PEEBLES

Melky, as principal lodger in Mrs. Flitwick's establishment, occupied what that lady was accustomed to describe as the front drawing-room floor—a couple of rooms opening one into the other. Into one of these, furnished as a sitting-room, he now led Lauriston's friend, hospitably invited him to a seat, and took a quiet look at him. He at once sized up Mr. John Purdie for what he was—a well-to-do, well-dressed, active-brained young business man, probably accustomed to controlling and dealing with important affairs. And well satisfied with this preliminary inspection, he immediately plunged into the affair of the moment.

“Mister,” began Melky, pulling up a chair to Purdie's side, and assuming a tone and manner of implicit confidence. “I've heard of you. Me and Mr. Lauriston's close friends. My name's Mr. Rubinstein—Mr. Melchior Rubinstein, commonly called Melky. I know all about you—you're the friend that Lauriston asked for a bit of help to see him through, like—ain't it? Just so—and you sent him twenty pounds to be going on with—which he got, all right, last night. Also, same time, he got another twenty quid for two of his lit'ry works—stories, mister. Mister!—I wish he'd got your money and the other money just an hour before it come to hand!

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S'elp me!—if them there letters had only come in by one post earlier, it 'ud ha' saved a heap o' trouble!"

"I haven't the remotest notion of what you're talking about, you know," said Purdie good-naturedly. "You evidently know more than I do. I knew Andie Lauriston well enough up to the time he left Peebles, but I've never seen or heard of him since until he wrote to me the other week. What's it all about, and why has he gone back to Peebles? I told him I was coming up here any day now—and here I am, and he's gone!"

Melky edged his chair still nearer to his visitor, and with a cautious glance at the door, lowered his voice.

"I'm a-going to tell you all about it, mister," he said. "I know you Scotch gentlemen have got rare headpieces on you, and you'll pick it up sharp enough. Now you listen to me, Mr. Purdie, same as if I was one of them barrister chaps stating a case, and you'll get at it in no time."

John Purdie, who had already recognized his host as a character, as interesting as he was amusing, listened attentively while Melky told the story of Lauriston's doings and adventure from the moment of his setting out to pawn his watch at Multenius's pledge-office to that in which, on Melky's suggestion, he had made a secret and hurried departure for Peebles. Melky forgot no detail; he did full justice to every important point, and laid particular stress on the proceedings before the Coroner. And in the end he appealed confidently to his listener.

"And now I put it up to you, mister—straight!" concluded Melky. "Could I ha' done better for him than to give him the advice I did? Wasn't it best for him

to go where he could get some evidence on his own behalf, than to run the risk of being arrested, and put where he couldn't do nothing for himself? What d'you say, now, Mr. Purdie?"

"Yes," agreed Purdie, after a moment's further thought. "I think you did well. He'll no doubt be able to find some old friends in Peebles who can surely remember that his mother did possess those two rings. But you must bear this in mind—the police, you say, have shadowed him since yesterday afternoon. Well, when they find he's flown, they'll take that as a strong presumptive evidence of guilt. They'll say he's flying from justice!"

"Don't matter, mister, if Lauriston comes back with proof of his innocence," replied Melky.

"Yes, but they'll not wait for that," said Purdie. "They'll set the hue-and-cry on to him—at once. He's not the sort to be easily mistaken or overlooked—unless he's changed a lot this late year or two—he was always a good-looking lad."

"Is so now, mister," remarked Melky, "is so now!"

"Very well," continued Purdie. "Then I want to make a suggestion to you. It seems to me that the wisest course is for you and me to go straight to the police authorities, and tell them frankly that Lauriston has gone to get evidence that those rings are really his property, and that he'll return in a day or two with that evidence. That will probably satisfy them—I think I can add a bit more that will help further. We don't want it to be thought that the lad's run away rather than face a possible charge of murder, you know!"

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"I see your point, mister, I see your point!" agreed Melky. "I'm with you!—I ain't no objection to that. Of course, there ain't no need to tell the police precisely where he has gone—what?"

"Not a bit!" said Purdie. "But I'll make myself responsible to them for his re-appearance. Now— did you and he arrange anything about communicating with each other?"

"Yes," replied Melky. "If anything turns up this next day or two I'm to wire to him at the post-office, Peebles. If he finds what he wants, he'll wire to me, here; at once."

"Good!" said Purdie. "Now, here's another matter. You've mentioned Mr. Spencer Levendale and this book which was so strangely left at the pledge-office. I happen to know Mr. Levendale—pretty well."

"You do, mister!" exclaimed Melky. "Small world, ain't it, now?"

"I met Mr. Spencer Levendale last September—two months ago," continued Purdie. "He was staying at an hotel in the Highlands, with his children and their governess: I was at the same hotel, for a month—he and I used to go fishing together. We got pretty friendly, and he asked me to call on him next time I was in town. Here I am—and when we've been to the police, I'm going to Sussex Square—to tell him I'm a friend of Lauriston's, that Lauriston is in some danger over this business, and to ask him if he can tell me more about—that book!"

Melky jumped up and wrung his visitor's hand.

"Mister!—you're one o' the right sort," he said fervently. "That there book has something to do with it!

My idea is that the man what carried that book into the shop is the man what scragged my poor old relative—fact, mister! Levendale, he wouldn't tell us anything much this morning—maybe he'll tell you more. Stand by Lauriston, mister!—we'll pull him through."

"You seem very well disposed towards him," remarked Purdie. "He's evidently taken your fancy."

"And my cousin Zillah's," answered Melky, with a confidential grin. "Zillah—loveliest girl in all Paddington, mister—she's clear gone on the young fellow! And—a word in your ear, mister!—Zillah's been educated like a lady, and now that the old man's gone, Zillah'll have—ah! a fortune that 'ud make a nigger turn white! And no error about it! See it through, mister!"

"I'll see it through," said Purdie. "Now, then—these police. Look here—is there a good hotel in this neighbourhood?—I've all my traps in that taxi-cab downstairs—I drove straight here from the station, because I wanted to see Andie Lauriston at once."

"Money's no object to you, I reckon, mister?" asked Melky, with a shrewd glance at the young Scotsman's evident signs of prosperity.

"Not in reason," answered Purdie.

"Then there's the Great Western Hotel, at the end o' Praed Street," said Melky. "That'll suit a young gentleman like you, mister, down to the ground. And you'll be right on the spot!"

"Come with me, then," said Purdie. "And then to the police."

Half-an-hour's private conversation with the police authorities enabled Purdie to put some different ideas

into the official heads. They began to look at matters in a new light. Here was a wealthy young Scottish manufacturer, a person of standing and position, who was able to vouch for Andrew Lauriston in more ways than one, who had known him from boyhood, had full faith in him and in his word, and was certain that all that Lauriston had said about the rings and about his finding of Daniel Multenius would be found to be absolutely true. They willingly agreed to move no further in the matter until Lauriston's return—and Purdie noticed, not without a smile, that they pointedly refrained from asking where he had gone to. He came out from that interview with Ayscough in attendance upon him—and Melky, waiting without, saw that things had gone all right.

"You might let me have your London address, sir," said Ayscough. "I might want to let you know something."

"Great Western Hotel," answered Purdie. "I shall stay there until Lauriston's return, and until this matter's entirely cleared up, as far as he's concerned. Come there, if you want me. All right," he continued, as he and Melky walked away from the police-station. "They took my word for it!—they'll do nothing until Lauriston comes back. Now then, you know this neighbourhood, and I don't—show me the way to Sussex Square—I'm going to call on Mr. Levendale at once."

John Purdie had a double object in calling on Mr. Spencer Levendale. He had mentioned to Melky that when he met Levendale in the Highlands, Levendale, who was a widower, had his children and their governess with him. But he had not mentioned that he, Purdie,

had fallen in love with the governess, and that one of his objects in coming to London just then was to renew his acquaintance with her. It was chiefly of the governess that he was thinking as he stood on the steps of the big house in Sussex Square—perhaps, in a few minutes, he would see her again.

But Purdie was doomed to see neither Mr. Spencer Levendale nor the pretty governess that day. Mr. Levendale, said the butler, was on business in the city and was to dine out that evening: Miss Bennett had taken the two children to see a relative of theirs at Hounslow, and would not return until late. So Purdie, having pencilled his London address on them, left cards for Mr. Levendale and Miss Bennett, and, going back to his hotel, settled himself in his quarters to await developments. He spent the evening in reading the accounts of the inquest on Daniel Multenius—in more than one of the newspapers they were full and circumstantial, and it needed little of his shrewd perception to convince him that his old schoolmate stood in considerable danger if he failed to establish his ownership of the rings.

He had finished breakfast next morning and was thinking of strolling round to Melky Rubinstein's lodgings, to hear if any news had come from Lauriston, when a waiter brought him Ayscough's card, saying that its presenter was waiting for him in the smoking-room. Purdie went there at once: the detective, who looked unusually grave and thoughtful, drew him aside into a quiet part of the room.

"There's a strange affair occurred during the night, Mr. Purdie," said Ayscough, when they were alone.

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“And it’s my opinion it’s connected with this Multenius affair.”

“What is it?” asked Purdie.

“This,” replied Ayscough. “A Praed Street tradesman—in a small way—was picked up, dying, in a quiet street off Maida Vale, at twelve o’clock last night, and he died soon afterwards. And—he’d been poisoned!—but how, the doctors can’t yet tell.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE CALL FOR HELP

Purdie, whose temperament inclined him to slowness and deliberation in face of any grave crisis, motioned the detective to take a seat in the quiet corner of the smoking-room, into which they had retreated, and sat down close by him.

“Now, to begin with,” he said, “why do you think this affair is connected with the affair of the old pawn-broker? There must be some link.”

“There is a link, sir,” answered Ayscough. “The man was old Daniel Multenius’s next door neighbour: name of Parslett—James Parslett, fruit and vegetable dealer. Smallish way of business, but well known enough in that quarter. Now, I’ll explain something to you. I’m no hand at drawing,” continued the detective, “but I think I can do a bit of a rough sketch on this scrap of paper which will make clear to you the lie of the land. These two lines represent Praed Street. Here, where I make this cross, is Daniel Multenius’s pawnshop. The front part of it—the jeweller’s shop—looks out on Praed Street. At the side is a narrow passage or entry: from that you get access to the pledge-office. Now then, Multenius’s premises run down one side of this passage: Parslett’s run down the other. Parslett’s house has a side-door into it, exactly opposite the door into Multenius’s pledge office. Is that clear, Mr. Purdie?”

"Quite!" answered Purdie. "I understand it exactly."

"Then my theory is, that Parslett saw the real murderer of Daniel Multenius come out of Multenius's side-door, while he, Parslett, was standing at his own; that he recognized him, that he tried to blackmail him yesterday, and that the man contrived to poison him, in such a fashion that Parslett died shortly after leaving him," said Ayseough, confidently. "It's but a theory—but I'll lay anything I'm not far out in it!"

"What reason have you for thinking that Parslett blackmailed the murderer?" asked Purdie.

"This!" answered the detective, with something of triumph in his tone. "I've been making some enquiries already this morning, early as it is. When Parslett was picked up and carried to the hospital—this St. Mary's Hospital, close by here—he was found to have fifty pounds in gold in his pocket. Now, according to Parslett's widow, whom I've seen this morning, Parslett was considerably hard up yesterday. Trade hasn't been very good with him of late, and she naturally knows his circumstances. He went out of the house last night about nine o'clock, saying he was going to have a stroll round, and the widow says she's certain he'd no fifty pounds on him when he left her—it would be a wonder, she says, if he'd as much as fifty shillings! Now then, Mr. Purdie, where did a man like that pick up fifty sovereigns between the time he went out, and the time he was picked up, dying?"

"He might have borrowed it from some friend," suggested Purdie.

"I thought of that, sir," said Ayscough. "It seems the natural thing to think of. But Mrs. Parslett says they haven't a friend from whom he could have borrowed such an amount—not one! No, sir!—my belief is that Parslett saw some man enter and leave Multenius's shop; that he knew the man; that he went and plumped him with the affair, and that the man gave him that gold to get rid of him at the moment—and contrived to poison him, too!"

Purdie considered the proposition for awhile in silence.

"Well," he remarked at last, "if that's so, it seems to establish two facts—first, that the murderer is some man who lives in this neighbourhood, and second, that he's an expert in poisons."

"Right, sir!" agreed Ayscough. "Quite right. And it would, of course, establish another—the innocence of your friend, Lauriston."

Purdie smiled.

"I never had any doubt of that," he said.

"Between ourselves, neither had I," remarked Ayscough heartily. "I told our people that I, personally, was convinced of the young fellow's complete innocence from the very first—and it was I who found him in the shop. It's a most unfortunate thing that he was there, and a sad coincidence that those rings of his were much of a muchness with the rings in the tray in the old man's parlour—but I've never doubted him. No, sir!—I believe all this business goes a lot deeper than that! It's no common affair—old Daniel Multenius was attacked by somebody—somebody!—for some special reason—and it's

going to take a lot of getting at. And I'm convinced this Parslett affair is a development—Parslett's been poisoned because he knew too much."

"You say you don't know what particular poison was used?" asked Purdie. "It would be something of a clue to know that. Because, if it turned out to be one of a very subtle nature, that would prove that whoever administered it had made a special study of poisons."

"I don't know that—yet," answered Ayscough. "But," he continued, rising from his chair, "if you'd step round with me to the hospital, we might get to know, now. There's one or two of their specialists been making an examination. It's only a mere step along the street."

Purdie followed the detective out and along Praed Street. Before they reached the doors of the hospital, a man came up to Ayscough: a solid, substantial-looking person, of cautious manner and watchful eye, whose glance wandered speculatively from the detective to his companion. Evidently sizing Purdie up as some one in Ayscough's confidence, he spoke—in the fashion of one who has something as mysterious, as important, to communicate.

"Beg your pardon, Mr. Ayscough," he said. "A word with you sir. You know me, Mr. Ayscough?"

Ayscough looked sharply at his questioner.

"Mr. Goodyer, isn't it?" he asked. "Oh, yes, I remember. What is it? You can speak before this gentleman—it's all right."

"About this affair of last night—Parslett, you know," said Goodyer, drawing the detective aside, and lowering

his voice, so that passers-by might not hear. "There's something I can tell you—I've heard all about the matter from Parslett's wife. But I've not told her what I can tell you, Mr. Ayscough."

"And—what's that?" enquired the detective.

"I'm Parslett's landlord, you know," continued Goodyer. "He's had that shop and dwelling-house of me for some years. Now, Parslett's not been doing very well of late, from one cause or another, and to put it in a nutshell, he owed me half a year's rent. I saw him yesterday, and told him I must have the money at once: in fact, I pressed him pretty hard about it.—I'd been at him for two or three weeks, and I could see it was no good going on. He'd been down in the mouth about it, the last week or so, but yesterday afternoon he was confident enough. 'Now, you needn't alarm yourself, Mr. Goodyer,' he said. 'There's a nice bit of money going to be paid to me tonight, and I'll settle up with you before I stick my head on the pillow,' he said. 'Tonight, for certain?' says I. 'Before even I go to bed!' he says. 'I can't fix it to a minute, but you can rely on me calling at your house in St. Mary's Terrace before eleven o'clock—with the money.' And he was so certain about it, Mr. Ayscough, that I said no more than that I should be much obliged, and I'd wait up for him. And," concluded Goodyer, "I did wait up—till half-past twelve—but he never came. So this morning, of course, I walked round here—and then I heard what happened—about him being picked up dying and since being dead—with fifty pounds in gold in his pocket. Of course, Mr. Ayscough, that was the money he referred to."

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"You haven't mentioned this to anybody?" asked Ayscough.

"Neither to the widow nor to anybody—but you," replied Goodyer.

"Don't!" said Ayscough. "Keep it to yourself till I give you the word. You didn't hear anything from Parslett as to where the money was coming from?"

"Not one syllable!" answered Goodyer. "But I could see he was dead sure of having it."

"Well—keep quiet about it," continued Ayscough. "There'll be an inquest, you know, and what you have to tell 'll come in handy, then. There's some mystery about all this affair, Mr. Goodyer, and it's going to take some unravelling."

"You're right!" said Goodyer. "I believe you!"

He went off along the street, and the detective turned to Purdie and motioned him towards the hospital.

"Queer, all that, sir!" he muttered. "Very queer! But it all tends to showing that my theory's the right one. Now if you'll just stop in the waiting-room a few minutes, I'll find out if these doctors have come to any conclusion about the precise nature of the poison."

Purdie waited for ten minutes, speculating on the curiosities of the mystery into which he had been so strangely plunged: at last the detective came back, shaking his head.

"Can't get a definite word out of 'em, yet," he said, as they went away. "There's two or three of 'em—big experts in—what do you call it—oh, yes, toxology—putting their heads together over the analysing business, and they won't say anything so far—they'll leave that to the

inquest. But I gathered this much, Mr. Purdie, from the one I spoke to—this man Parslett was poisoned in some extremely clever fashion, and by some poison that's not generally known, which was administered to him probably half-an-hour before it took effect. What's that argue, sir, but that whoever gave him that poison is something of an expert? Deep game, Mr. Purdie, a very deep game indeed!—and now I don't think there's much need to be anxious about that young friend of yours. I'm certain, anyway, that the man who poisoned Parslett is the man who killed poor old Daniel Multenius. But—we shall see."

Purdie parted from Ayscough outside the hospital and walked along to Mrs. Flitwick's house in Star Street. He met Melky Rubinstein emerging from the door; Melky immediately pulled out a telegram which he thrust into Purdie's hand.

"Just come, mister!" exclaimed Melky. "There's a word for you in it—I was going to your hotel. Read what he says."

Purdie unfolded the pink paper and read.

"On the track all right understand Purdie is in town if he comes to Star Street explain all to him will wire again later in day."

"Good!" said Purdie. He handed back the telegram and looked meditatively at Melky. "Are you busy this morning?" he asked.

"Doing no business whatever, mister," lisped Melky, solemnly. "Not until this business is settled—not me!"

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"Come to the hotel with me," continued Purdie. "I want to talk to you about something."

But when they reached the hotel, all thought of conversation was driven out of Purdie's mind for the moment. The hall-porter handed him a note, remarking that it had just come. Purdie's face flushed as he recognized the handwriting: he turned sharply away and tore open the envelope. Inside, on a half-sheet of notepaper, were a few lines—from the pretty governess at Mr. Spencer Levendale's.

"Can you come here at once and ask for me?
There is something seriously wrong: I am much troubled and have no one in London I can consult."

With a hasty excuse to Melky, Purdie ran out of the hotel, and set off in quick response to the note.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE PRIVATE LABORATORY

As he turned down Spring Street towards Sussex Square, Purdie hastily reviewed his knowledge of Mr. Spencer Levendale and his family. He had met them, only two months previously, at a remote and out-of-the-way place in the Highlands, in a hotel where he and they were almost the only guests. Under such circumstances, strangers are soon drawn together, and as Levendale and Purdie had a common interest in fishing they were quickly on good terms. But Purdie was thinking now as he made his way towards Levendale's London house that he really knew very little of this man who was evidently mixed up in some way with the mystery into which young Andie Lauriston had so unfortunately also become intermingled. He knew that Levendale was undoubtedly a very wealthy man: there were all the signs of wealth about him; he had brought several servants down to the Highlands with him: money appeared to be plentiful with him as pebbles are on a beach. Purdie learnt bit by bit that Levendale had made a great fortune in South Africa, that he had come home to England and gone into Parliament; that he was a widower and the father of two little girls—he learnt, too, that the children's governess, Miss Elsie Bennett, a pretty and taking girl of twenty-two or three, had come with them from

Cape Town. But of Levendale's real character and self he knew no more than could be gained from holiday acquaintance. Certain circumstances told him by Melky about the rare book left in old Multenius's parlour inclined Purdie to be somewhat suspicious that Levendale was concealing something which he knew about that affair—and now here was Miss Bennett writing what, on the face of it, looked like an appealing letter to him, as if something had happened.

Purdie knew something had happened as soon as he was admitted to the house. Levendale's butler, who had accompanied his master to the Highlands, and had recognized Purdie on his calling the previous day, came hurrying to him in the hall, as soon as the footman opened the door.

"You haven't seen Mr. Levendale since you were here yesterday, sir?" he asked, in a low, anxious voice.

"Seen Mr. Levendale? No!" answered Purdie. "Why—what do you mean?"

The butler looked round at a couple of footmen who hung about the door.

"Don't want to make any fuss about it, Mr. Purdie," he whispered, "though it's pretty well known in the house already. The fact is, sir, Mr. Levendale's missing!"

"Missing?" exclaimed Purdie. "Since when?"

"Only since last night, sir," replied the butler, "but the circumstances are queer. He dined out with some City gentlemen, somewhere, last night, and he came home about ten o'clock. He wasn't in the house long. He went into his laboratory—he spends a lot of time in ex-

perimenting in chemistry, you know, sir—and he called me in there. ‘I’m going out again for an hour, Grayson,’ he says. ‘I shall be in at eleven: don’t go to bed, for I want to see you for a minute or two.’ Of course, there was nothing in that, Mr. Purdie, and I waited for him. But he never came home—and no message came. He never came home at all—and this morning I’ve telephoned to his two clubs, and to one or two other places in the City—nobody’s seen or heard anything of him. And I can’t think what’s happened—it’s all so unlike his habits.”

“He didn’t tell you where he was going?” asked Purdie.

“No, sir, but he went on foot,” answered the butler. “I let him out—he turned up Paddington way.”

“You didn’t notice anything out of the common about him?” suggested Purdie.

The butler hesitated for a moment.

“Well, sir,” he said at last, “I did notice something. Come this way, Mr. Purdie.”

Turning away from the hall, he led Purdie through the library in which Levendale had received Ayscough and his companions into a small room that opened out of it.

Purdie, looking round him, found that he was standing in a laboratory, furnished with chemical apparatus of the latest descriptions. Implements and appliances were on all sides; there were rows of bottles on the shelves; a library of technical books filled a large book-case; everything in the place betokened the pursuit of a scientific investigator. And Purdie’s keen sense of

smell immediately noted the prevalent atmosphere of drugs and chemicals.

"It was here that I saw Mr. Levendale last night, sir," said the butler. "He called me in. He was measuring something from one of those bottles into a small phial, Mr. Purdie—he put the phial in his waistcoat pocket. Look at those bottles, sir—you'll see they all contain poison!—you can tell that by the make of 'em."

Purdie glanced at the shelf which the butler indicated. The bottles ranged on it were all of blue glass, and all triangular in shape, and each bore a red label with the word *Poison* prominently displayed.

"Odd!" he said. "You've some idea?" he went on, looking closely at the butler. "Something on your mind about this? What is it?"

The butler shook his head.

"Well, sir," he answered, "when you see a gentleman measuring poison into a phial, which he carefully puts in his pocket, and when he goes out, and when he never comes back, and when you can't hear of him, anywhere!—why, what are you to think? Looks strange, now, doesn't it, Mr. Purdie?"

"I don't know Mr. Levendale well enough to say," replied Purdie. "There may be some quite good reason for Mr. Levendale's absence. He'd no trouble of any sort, had he?"

"He seemed a bit upset, once or twice, yesterday—and the night before," said the butler. "I noticed it—in little things. Well!—I can't make it out, sir. You see, I've been with him ever since he came back to Eng-

land—some years now—and I know his habits, thoroughly. However, we can only wait—I believe Miss Bennett sent for you, Mr. Purdie?”

“Yes,” said Purdie. “She did.”

“This way, sir,” said the butler. “Miss Bennett’s alone, now—the children have just gone out with their nurses.”

He led Purdie through the house to a sitting-room looking out on the garden of the Square, and ushered him into the governess’s presence.

“I’ve told Mr. Purdie all about it, miss,” he said, confidentially. “Perhaps you’ll talk it over with him! I can’t think of anything more to do—until we hear something.”

Left alone, Purdie and Elsie Bennett looked at each other as they shook hands. She was a fair, slender girl, naturally shy and retiring; she was manifestly shy at renewing her acquaintance with Purdie, and Purdie himself, conscious of his own feelings towards her, felt a certain embarrassment and awkwardness.

“You sent for me,” he said brusquely. “I came the instant I got your note. Grayson kept me talking downstairs. You’re bothered—about Mr. Levendale?”

“Yes,” she answered. Then she pointed to a chair. “Won’t you sit down?” she said, and took a chair close by. “I sent for you, because—it may seem strange, but it’s a fact!—I couldn’t think of anybody else! It seemed so fortunate that you were in London—and close by. I felt that—that I could depend on you.”

“Thank you,” said Purdie. “Well—you can! And—what is it?”

"Grayson's told you about Mr. Levendale's going out last night, and never coming back, nor sending any message?" she continued. "As Grayson says, considering Mr. Levendale's habits, that is certainly very strange! But—I want to tell you something beyond that—I must tell somebody! And I know that if I tell you you'll keep it secret—until, or unless you think you ought to tell it to—the police!"

Purdie started.

"The police!" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

Elsie Bennett turned to a table, and picked up a couple of newspapers.

"Have you read this Praed Street mystery affair?" she asked. "I mean the account of the inquest?"

"Every word—and heard more, besides," answered Purdie. "That young fellow, Andie Lauriston, is an old schoolmate and friend of mine. I came here yesterday to see him, and found him plunged into this business. Of course, he's absolutely innocent."

"Has he been arrested?" asked Elsie, almost eagerly.

"No!" replied Purdie. "He's gone away—to get evidence that those rings which are such a feature of the case are really his and were his mother's."

"Have you noticed these particulars, at the end of the inquest, about the book which was found in the pawnbroker's parlour?" she went on. "The Spanish manuscript?"

"Said to have been lost by Mr. Levendale in an omnibus," answered Purdie. "Yes! What of it?"

The girl bent nearer to him.

"It seems a dreadful thing to say," she whispered,

“but I must tell somebody—I can’t, I daren’t keep it to myself any longer! Mr. Levendale isn’t telling the truth about that book!”

Purdie involuntarily glanced at the door—and drew his chair nearer to Elsie’s.

“You’re sure of that?” he whispered. “Just so! Now—in what way?”

“It says here,” answered Elsie, tapping the newspapers with her finger, “that Mr. Levendale lost this book in a ’bus, which he left at the corner of Chapel Street, and that he was so concerned about the loss that he immediately sent advertisements off to every morning newspaper in London. The last part of that is true—the first part is not true! Mr. Levendale did not lose his book—he did not leave it in the ’bus! I’m sorry to have to say it—but all that is invention on his part—why, I don’t know.”

Purdie had listened to this with a growing feeling of uneasiness and suspicion. The clouds centring round Levendale were certainly thickening.

“Now, just tell me—how do you know all this?” he asked. “Rely on me—to the full!”

“I’ll tell you,” replied Elsie, readily. “Because, about four o’clock on the afternoon of the old man’s death, I happened to be at the corner of Chapel Street. I saw Mr. Levendale get out of the ’bus. He did not see me. He crossed Edgware Road and walked rapidly down Praed Street. And—he was carrying that book in his hand!”

“You’re sure it was that book?” asked Purdie.

“According to the description given in this account

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and in the advertisement—yes,” she answered. “I noticed the fine binding. Although Mr. Levendale didn’t see me—there were a lot of people about—I was close to him. I am sure it was the book described here.”

“And—he went in the direction of the pawnshop?” said Purdie. “What on earth does it all mean? What did he mean by advertising for the book, when—”

Before he could say more, a knock came at the door, and the butler entered, bearing an open telegram in his hand. His face wore an expression of relief.

“Here’s a wire from Mr. Levendale, Miss Bennett,” he said. “It’s addressed to me. He says, ‘Shall be away from home, on business, for a few days. Let all go on as usual.’ That’s better, miss! But,” continued Grayson, glancing at Purdie, “it’s still odd—for do you see, sir, where that wire has been sent from? Spring Street—close by!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CONFERENCE

Purdie was already sufficiently acquainted with the geography of the Paddington district to be aware of the significance of Grayson's remark. The Spring Street Post Office, at which Levendale's wire had been handed in, was only a few minutes' walk from the house—it stood, in fact, between Purdie's hotel and Sussex Square, and he had passed it on his way to Levendale's. It was certainly odd that a man who was within five minutes' walk of his own house should send a telegram there, when he had nothing to do but walk down one street and turn the corner of another to give his message in person.

"Sent off, do you see, sir, twenty minutes ago," observed the butler, pointing to some figures in the telegram form. "So—Mr. Levendale must have been close by—then!"

"Not necessarily," remarked Purdie. "He may have sent a messenger with that wire—perhaps he himself was catching a train at Paddington."

Grayson shook his head knowingly.

"There's a telegraph office on the platform there, sir," he answered. "However—there it is, and I suppose there's no more to be done."

He left the room again, and Purdie looked at the gov-

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erness. She, too, looked at him: there was a question in the eyes of both.

“What do you make of that?” asked Purdie after a pause.

“What do you make of it?” she asked in her turn.

“It looks odd—but there may be a reason for it,” he answered. “Look here!—I’m going to ask you a question. What do you know of Mr. Levendale? You’ve been governess to his children for some time, haven’t you?”

“For six months before he left Cape Town, and ever since we all came to England, three years ago,” she answered. “I know that he’s very rich, and a very busy man, and a member of Parliament, and that he goes to the City a great deal—and that’s all! He’s a very reserved man, too—of course, he never tells me anything. I’ve never had any conversation with him excepting about the children.”

“You’re upset about this book affair?” suggested Purdie.

“Why should Mr. Levendale say that he left that book in the omnibus, when I myself saw him leave the ’bus with it in his hand, and go down Praed Street with it?” she asked. “Doesn’t it look as if he were the person who left it in that room—where the old man was found lying dead?”

“That, perhaps, is the very reason why he doesn’t want people to know that he did leave it there,” remarked Purdie, quietly. “There’s more in all this than lies on the surface. You wanted my advice? Very well—don’t say anything to anybody till you see me again.

I must go now—there's a man waiting for me at my hotel. I may call again, mayn't I?"

"Do!" she said, giving him her hand. "I am bothered about this—it's useless to deny it—and I've no one to talk to about it. Come—any time."

Purdie repressed a strong desire to stay longer, and to turn the conversation to more personal matters. But he was essentially a business man, and the matters of the moment seemed to be critical. So he promised to return, and then hurried back to his hotel—to find Melky Rubinstein pacing up and down outside the entrance.

Purdie tapped Melky's shoulder and motioned him to walk along Praed Street.

"Look here!" he said. "I want you to take me to see your cousin—and the pawnshop. We must have a talk—you said your cousin's a good business woman. She's the sort we can discuss business with, eh?"

"My cousin Zillah Wildrose, mister," answered Melky, solemnly, "is one of the best! She's a better headpiece on her than what I have—and that's saying a good deal. I was going to suggest you should come there. Talk!—s'elp me, Mr. Purdie, it strikes me there'll be a lot of that before we've done. What about this here affair of last night?—I've just seen Mr. Ayscough, passing along—he's told me all about it. Do you think it's anything to do with our business?"

"Can't say," answered Purdie. "Wait till we can discuss matters with your cousin."

Melky led the way to the side-door of the pawnshop. Since the old man's death, the whole establishment had

been closed—Zillah had refused to do any business until her grandfather's funeral was over. She received her visitors in the parlour where old Daniel had been found dead: after a moment's inspection of her, and the exchange of a few remarks about Lauriston, Purdie suggested that they should all sit down and talk matters over.

"Half-a-mo!" said Melky. "If we're going to have a cabinet council, mister, there's a lady that I want to bring into it—Mrs. Goldmark. I know something that Mrs. Goldmark can speak to—I've just been considering matters while I was waiting for you, Mr. Purdie, and I'm going to tell you and Zillah, and Mrs. Goldmark, of a curious fact that I know of. I'll fetch her—and while I'm away Zillah'll show you that there book what was found there."

Purdie looked with interest at the Spanish manuscript which seemed to be a factor of such importance.

"I suppose you never saw this before?" he asked, as Zillah laid it on the table before him. "And you're certain it wasn't in the place when you went out that afternoon, leaving your grandfather alone?"

"That I'm positive of," answered Zillah. "I never saw it in my life until my attention was drawn to it after he was dead. That book was brought in here during my absence, and it was neither bought nor pawned—that's absolutely certain! Of course, you know who's book it is?"

"Mr. Spencer Levendale's," answered Purdie. "Yes—I know all those particulars—and about his advertisements for it, and a little more. And I want to discuss

all that with you and your cousin. This Mrs. Goldmark—she's to be fully trusted?"

Zillah replied that Mrs. Goldmark was worthy of entire confidence, and an old friend, and Melky presently returning with her, Purdie suggested they should all sit down and talk—informally and in strict privacy.

"You know why I'm concerning myself in this?" he said, looking round at his three companions. "I'm anxious that Andie Lauriston should be fully and entirely cleared! I've great faith in him—he's beginning what I believe will be a successful career, and it would be a terrible thing if any suspicion rested on him. So I want, for his sake, to thoroughly clear up this mystery about your relative's death."

"Mister!" said Melky, in his most solemn tones. "Speaking for my cousin there, and myself, there ain't nothing what we wouldn't do to clear Mr. Lauriston! We ain't never had one moment's suspicion of him from the first, knowing the young fellow as we do. So we're with you in that matter, ain't we, Zillah?"

"Mr. Purdie feels sure of that," agreed Zillah, with a glance at Lauriston's old schoolmate. "There's no need to answer him, Melky."

"I am sure!" said Purdie. "So—let's put our wits together—we'll consider the question of approaching the police when we've talked amongst ourselves. Now—I want to ask you some very private questions. They spring out of that rare book there. There's no doubt that book belongs to Mr. Levendale. Do either of you know if Mr. Levendale had any business relations with the late Mr. Rubinstein?"

Zillah shook her head.

"None!—that I know of," she answered. "I've helped my grandfather in this business for some time. I never heard him mention Mr. Levendale. Mr. Levendale never came here, certainly."

Melky shook his head, too.

"When Mr. Ayscough, and Mr. Lauriston, and me went round to Sussex Square, to see Mr. Levendale about that advertisement for his book," he remarked, "he said he'd never heard of Daniel Multenius. That's a fact, mister!"

"Had Mr. Multenius any private business relations of which he didn't tell you?" asked Purdie, turning to Zillah.

"He might have had," admitted Zillah. "He was out a good deal. I don't know what he might do when he went out. He was—close. We—it's no use denying it—we don't know all about it. His solicitor's making some enquiries—I expect him here, any time, today."

"It comes to this," observed Purdie. "Your grandfather met his death by violence, the man who attacked him came in here during your absence. The question I want to get solved is—was the man who undoubtedly left that book here the guilty man? If so—who is he?"

Melky suddenly broke the silence which followed upon this question.

"I'm going to tell something that I ain't told to nobody—as yet!" he said. "Not even to Zillah. After this here parlour had been cleared, I took a look round. I've very sharp eyes, Mr. Purdie. I found this here—half-hidden under the rug there, where the poor old man

had been lying." He pulled out the platinum solitaire, laid it on the palm of one hand, and extended the hand to Mrs. Goldmark. "You've seen the like of that before, ain't you?" asked Melky.

"Mercy be upon us!" gasped Mrs. Goldmark, starting in her seat. "I've the fellow to it lying in my desk!"

"And it was left on a table in your restaurant," continued Melky, "by a man what looked like a Colonial party—I know!—I saw it by accident in your place the other night, and one o' your girls told me. Now then, Mr. Purdie, here's a bit more of puzzlement—and perhaps a clue. These here platinum solitaire cuff-links are valuable—they're worth—well, I'd give a good few pounds for the pair. Now who's the man who lost one in this here parlour—right there!—and the other in Mrs. Goldmark's restaurant? For—it's a pair! There's no doubt about that, mister!—there's that same curious and unusual device on each. Mister!—them studs has at some time or other been made to special order!"

Purdie turned the solitaire over, and looked at Zillah.

"Have you ever seen anything like this before?" he asked.

"Never!" said Zillah. "It's as Melky says—specially made."

"And you have its fellow—lost in your restaurant?" continued Purdie, turning to Mrs. Goldmark.

"Its very marrow," assented Mrs. Goldmark, fervently, "is in my desk! It was dropped on one of our tables a few afternoons ago by a man who, as Mr. Rubinstein says, looked like one of those Colonials. Leastways, my waitress, Rosa, she picked it up exactly where he'd

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been sitting. So I put it away till he comes in again, you see. Oh, yes!"

"Has he been in again?" asked Purdie.

"Never was he inside my door before!" answered Mrs. Goldmark dramatically. "Never has he been inside it since! But—I keep his property, just so. In my desk it is!"

Purdie considered this new evidence in silence for a moment.

"The question now is—this," he said presently. "Is the man who seems undoubtedly to have dropped those studs the same man who brought that book in here? Or, had Mr. Multenius two callers here during your absence, Miss Wildrose? And—who is this mysterious man who dropped the studs—valuable things, with a special device on them? He'll have to be traced! Mrs. Goldmark—can you describe him, particularly?"

Before Mrs. Goldmark could reply, a knock came at the side-door, and Zillah, going to answer it, returned presently with a middle-aged, quiet-looking, gold-spectacled gentleman whom she introduced to Purdie as Mr. Penniket, solicitor to the late Daniel Multenius.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE DETECTIVE CALLS

Mr. Penniket, to whom the two cousins and Mrs. Goldmark were evidently very well known, looked a polite enquiry at the stranger as he took the chair which Melky drew forward for him.

"As Mr. Purdie is presumably discussing this affair with you," he observed, "I take it that you intend him to hear anything I have to tell?"

"That's so, Mr. Penniket," answered Melky. "Mr. Purdie's one of us, so to speak—you can tell us anything you like, before him. We were going into details when you come—there's some strange business on, Mr. Penniket! And we want to get a bit clear about it before we tell the police what we know."

"You know something that they don't know?" asked Mr. Penniket.

"More than a bit!" replied Melky, laconically. "This here affair's revolving itself into a network, nister, out of which somebody's going to find it hard work to break through!"

The solicitor, who had been quietly inspecting Purdie, gave him a sly smile.

"Then before I tell you what I have just found out," he said, turning to Melky, "I think you had better tell me all you know, and what you have been discussing.

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Possibly, I may have something to tell which bears on our knowledge. Let us be clear!"

He listened carefully while Purdie, at Zillah's request, told him briefly what had been said before his arrival, and Purdie saw at once that none of the facts surprised him. He asked Mrs. Goldmark one or two questions about the man who was believed to have dropped one of his cuff-links in her restaurant; he asked Melky a question as to his discovery of the other; he made no comment on the answers which they gave him. Finally, he drew his chair nearer to the table at which they were sitting, and invited their attention with a glance.

"There is no doubt," he said, "that the circumstances centring round the death of my late client are remarkably mysterious! What we want to get at, put into a nut-shell, is just this—what happened in this parlour between half-past four and half-past five on Monday afternoon? We might even narrow that down to—what happened between ten minutes to five and ten minutes past five? Daniel Multenius was left alone—we know that. Some person undoubtedly came in here—perhaps more than one person came. Who was the person? Were there two persons? If there were two, did they come together—or singly, separately? All that will have to be solved before we find out who it was that assaulted my late client, and so injured him that he died under the shock. Now, Miss Wildrose, and Mr. Rubinstein, there's one fact which you may as well get into your minds at once. Your deceased relative had his secrets!"

Neither Zillah nor Purdie made any comment on this, and the solicitor, with a meaning look at Purdie, went on.

“Not that Daniel Multenius revealed any of them to me!” he continued. “I have acted for him in legal matters for some years, but only in quite an ordinary way. He was a well-to-do man, Mr. Purdie—a rich man, in fact, and a considerable property owner—I did all his work of that sort. But as regards his secrets, I know nothing—except that since yesterday, I have discovered that he certainly had them. I have, as Miss Wildrose knows—and by her instructions—been making some enquiries at the bank where Mr. Multenius kept his account—the Empire and Universal, in Lombard Street—and I have made some curious unearthings in the course of them. Now then, between ourselves—Mr. Purdie being represented to me as in your entire confidence—I may as well tell you that Daniel Multenius most certainly had dealings of a business nature completely outside his business as jeweller and pawnbroker in this shop. That’s positively certain. And what is also certain is that in some of those dealings he was, in some way or another, intimately associated with the man whose name has already come up a good deal since Monday—Mr. Spencer Levendale!”

“S’elp me!” muttered Melky. “I heard Levendale, with my own two ears, say that he didn’t know the poor old fellow!”

“Very likely,” said Mr. Penniket, drily. “It was not convenient to him—we will assume—to admit that he did, just then. But I have discovered—from the bankers—that precisely two years ago, Mr. Spencer Levendale paid to Daniel Multenius a sum of ten thousand pounds. That’s a fact!”

"For what, mister?" demanded Melky.

"Can't say—nobody can say," answered the solicitor. "All the same, he did—paid it in, himself, to Daniel Multenius's credit, at the Empire and Universal. It went into the ordinary account, in the ordinary way, and was used by Mr. Multenius as part of his own effects—as no doubt it was. Now," continued Mr. Penniket, turning to Zillah, "I want to ask you a particular question. I know you had assisted your grandfather a great deal of late years. Had you anything to do with his banking account?"

"No!" replied Zillah, promptly. "That's the one thing I never had anything to do with. I never saw his pass-book, nor his deposit-book, nor even his cheque-book. He kept all that to himself."

"Just so," said Mr. Penniket. "Then, of course, you don't know that he dealt with considerable sums—evidently quite outside this business. He made large—sometimes very heavy—payments. And—this, I am convinced, is of great importance to the question we are trying to solve—most of these payments were sent to South Africa."

The solicitor glanced round his audience as if anxious to see that its various members grasped the significance of this announcement. And Melky at once voiced the first impression of, at any rate, three of them.

"Levendale comes from those parts!" he muttered. "Came here some two or three years ago—by all I can gather."

"Just so," said Mr. Penniket. "Therefore, possibly this South African business, in which my late client was

undoubtedly engaged, is connected with Mr. Levendale. That can be found out. But I have still more to tell you—perhaps, considering everything, the most important matter of the whole lot. On Monday morning last—that would be a few hours before his death—Mr. Multenius called at the bank and took from it a small packet which he had entrusted to his banker's keeping only a fortnight previously. The bankers do not know what was in that packet—he had more than once got them to take care of similar packets at one time or another. But they described it to me just now. A packet, evidently enclosing a small, hard box, some four or five inches square in all directions, wrapped in strong cartridge paper, and heavily sealed with red wax. It bore Mr. Multenius's name and address—written by himself. Now, then, Miss Wildrose—he took that packet away from the bank at about twelve-thirty on Monday noon. Have you seen anything of it?"

"Nothing!" answered Zillah with certainty. "There's no such packet here, Mr. Penniket. I've been through everything—safes, drawers, chests, since my grandfather died, and I've not found anything that I didn't know of. I remember that he went out last Monday morning—he was away two hours, and came in again about a quarter past one, but I never saw such a packet in his possession as that you describe. I know nothing of it."

"Well," said the solicitor, after a pause, "there are the facts. And the question now is—ought we not to tell all this to the police, at once? This connection of Levendale with my late client—as undoubted as it seems to have been secret—needs investigation. According to Mr.

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Purdie here—Levendale has suddenly disappeared—or, at any rate, left home under mysterious circumstances. Has that disappearance anything to do with Multenius's death? Has it anything to do with the death of this next door man, Parslett, last night? And has Levendale any connections with the strange man who dropped one platinum solitaire stud in Mrs. Goldmark's restaurant, and another in this parlour?"

No one attempted to answer these questions for a moment; then, Melky, as if seized with a sudden inspiration, smote the table and leaned over it towards the solicitor.

"Mr. Penniket!" he said, glancing around him as if to invite approval of what he was about to say. "You're a lawyer, mister!—you can put things in order and present 'em as if they was in a catalogue! Take the whole business to New Scotland Yard, sir!—let the big men at headquarters have a go at it. That's what I say! There's some queer mystery at the bottom of all this, Mr. Penniket, and it ain't a one-man job. Go to the Yard, mister—let 'em try their brains on it!"

Zillah made a murmured remark which seemed to second her cousin's proposal, and Mr. Penniket turned to Purdie.

"I understand you to be a business man," he remarked. "What do you say?"

"As far as I can put things together," answered Purdie, "I fully agree that there is some extraordinary mystery round and about Mr. Multenius's death. And as the detective force at New Scotland Yard exists for the solution of such problems—why, I should certainly tell

the authorities there everything that is known. Why not?"

"Very good," said Mr. Penniket. "Then it will be well if you two come with me. The more information we can give to the heads of the Criminal Investigation Department, the better. We'll go there at once."

In a few moments, the three men had gone, and Zillah and Mrs. Goldmark, left alone, looked at each other.

"Mrs. Goldmark!" said Zillah, after a long silence. "Did you see that man, yourself, who's supposed to have dropped that platinum solitaire in your restaurant?"

"Did I see him?" exclaimed Mrs. Goldmark. "Do I see you, Zillah? See him I did!—though never before, and never since! And ain't I the good memory for faces—and won't I know him again if he comes my way? Do you know what?—I ain't never forgotten a face what I've once looked at! Comes from keeping an eye on customers who looks as if they might have forgot to bring their moneys with 'em!"

"Well, I hope you'll see this man again," remarked Zillah. "I'd give a lot to get all the mystery cleared up."

Mrs. Goldmark observed that mysteries were not cleared up in a day, and presently went away to see that her business was being conducted properly. She was devoting herself to Zillah in very neighbourly fashion just then, but she had to keep running into the restaurant every hour or two to keep an eye on things. And during one of her absences, later in the early evening of that day, Zillah, alone in the house, answered a knock at the door, and opening it found Ayscough outside.

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His look betokened news, and Zillah led him into the parlour.

“Alone?” asked Ayscough. “Aye, well, I’ve something to tell you that I want you to keep to yourself—for a bit, anyway. Those rings, you know, that the young fellow, Lauriston, says are his, and had been his mother’s?”

“Well?” said Zillah, faintly, and half-conscious of some coming bad news. “What of them?”

“Our people,” continued the detective, “have had some expert chap—jeweller, or something of that sort, examining those rings, and comparing them with the rings that are in your tray. And in that tray there are several rings which have a private mark inside them. Now, then!—those two rings which Lauriston claims are marked in exactly the same fashion!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WHAT THE LAMPS SHONE ON

Zillah leaned suddenly back against the table by which she was standing, and Ayseough, who was narrowly watching the effect of his news, saw her turn very pale. She stood staring at him during a moment's silence; then she let a sharp exclamation escape her lips, and in the same instant her colour came back—heightened from surprise and indignation.

"Impossible!" she said. "I can't believe it; There may be marks inside our rings—that's likely enough. But how could those marks correspond with the marks in his rings?"

"I tell you it is so!" answered Ayseough. "I've seen the marks in both—with my own eyes. It occurred to one of our bosses this evening to have all the rings carefully examined by an expert—he got a man from one of the jeweller's shops in Edgware Road. This chap very soon pointed out that inside the two rings which young Lauriston says are his, and come to him from his mother, are certain private marks—jewellers' marks, this man called 'em—which are absolutely identical with similar marks which are inside some of the rings in the tray which was found on this table. That's a fact!—I tell you I've seen 'em—all! And—you see the significance of it! Of course, our people are now dead certain that young Lauriston's story is false, and that he grabbed those two rings out of that tray. See?"

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"Are you certain of it—yourself?" demanded Zillah. Ayscough hesitated and finally shook his head.

"Well, between ourselves, I'm not!" he answered. "I've a feeling from the first, that the lad's innocent enough. But it's a queer thing—and it's terribly against him. And—what possible explanation can there be?"

"You say you've seen those marks," said Zillah. "Would you know them again—on other goods?"

"I should!" replied Ayscough. "I can tell you what they are. There's the letter M. and then two crosses—one on each side of the letter. Very small, you know, and worn, too—this man I'm talking of used some sort of a magnifying glass."

Zillah turned away and went into the shop, which was all in darkness. Ayscough, waiting, heard the sound of a key being turned, then of a metallic tinkling; presently the girl came back, carrying a velvet-lined tray in one hand, and a jeweller's magnifying glass in the other.

"The rings in that tray you're talking about—the one you took away—are all very old stock," she remarked. "I've heard my grandfather say he'd had some of them thirty years or more. Here are some similar ones—we'll see if they're marked in the same fashion."

Five minutes later, Zillah had laid aside several rings marked in the way Ayscough had indicated, and she turned from them to him with a look of alarm.

"I can't understand it!" she exclaimed. "I know that these rings, and those in that tray at the police-station, are part of old stock that my grandfather had when he came here. He used to have a shop, years ago,

in the City—I'm not quite sure where, exactly—and this is part of the stock he brought from it. But, how could Mr. Lauriston's rings bear those marks? Because, from what I know of the trade, those are private marks—my grandfather's private marks!"

"Well, just so—and you can imagine what our people are inclined to say about it," said the detective. "They say now that the two rings which Lauriston claims never were his nor his mother's, but that he stole them out of your grandfather's tray. They're fixed on that, now."

"What will they do?" asked Zillah, anxiously. "Is he in danger?"

Ayscough gave her a knowing look.

"Between you and me," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, "I came around here privately—on my own hook, you know. I should be sorry if this really is fixed on the young fellow—there's a mystery, but it may be cleared up. Now, he's gone off to find somebody who can prove that those rings really were his mother's. You, no doubt, know where he's gone?"

"Yes—but I'm not going to tell," said Zillah firmly. "Don't ask me!"

"Quite right—I don't want to know myself," answered Ayscough. "And you'll probably have an idea when he's coming back? All right—take a tip from me. Keep him out of the way a bit—stop him from coming into this district. Let him know all about those marks—and if he can clear that up, well and good. You understand?—and of course, all this is between you and me."

"You're very good, Mr. Ayscough," replied Zillah,

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warmly. "I won't forget your kindness. And I'm certain this about the marks can be cleared up—but I don't know how!"

"Well—do as I say," said the detective. "Just give the tip to your cousin Melky, and to that young Scotch gentleman—let 'em keep Lauriston out of the way for a few days. In the meantime—this is a very queer case!—something may happen that'll fix the guilt on somebody else—conclusively. I've my own ideas and opinions—but we shall see. Maybe we shall see a lot—and everybody'll be more astonished than they're thinking for."

With this dark and sinister hint, Ayscough went away, and Zillah took the rings back to the shop, and locked them up again. And then she sat down to wait for Mrs. Goldmark—and to think. She had never doubted Lauriston's story for one moment, and she did not doubt it now. But she was quick to see the serious significance of what the detective had just told her, and she realized that action must be taken on the lines he had suggested. And so, having made herself ready for going out, she excused herself to Mrs. Goldmark when that good lady returned, and without saying anything to her as to the nature of her errand, hurried round to Star Street, to find Melky Rubinstein and tell him of the new development.

Mrs. Flitwick herself opened the door to Zillah and led her into the narrow passage. But at the mention of Melky she shook her head.

"I ain't set eyes on Mr. Rubinstein not since this

morning, miss," said she. "He went out with that young Scotch gentleman what come here yesterday asking for Mr. Lauriston, and he's never been in again—not even to put his nose inside the door. And at twelve o'clock there come a telegram for him—which it was the second that come this morning. The first, of course, he got before he went out; the one that come at noon's awaiting him. No—I ain't seen him all day!"

Zillah's quick wits were instantly at work as soon as she heard of the telegram.

"Oh, I know all about that wire, Mrs. Flitwick!" she exclaimed. "It's as much for me as for my cousin. Give it to me—and if Mr. Rubinstein comes in soon—or when he comes—tell him I've got it, and ask him to come round to me immediately—it's important."

Mrs. Flitwick produced the telegram at once, and Zillah, repeating her commands about Melky, hurried away with it. But at the first street lamp she paused, and tore open the envelope, and pulled out the message. As she supposed, it was from Lauriston, and had been handed in at Peebles at eleven o'clock that morning.

"Got necessary information returning at once
meet me at King's Cross at nine-twenty this
evening. L."

Zillah looked at her watch. It was then ten minutes to nine. There was just half an hour before Lauriston's train was due. Without a moment's hesitation, she turned back along Star Street, hurried into Edgware Road and hailing the first taxi-cab she saw, bade its

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driver to get to the Great Northern as fast as possible. Whatever else happened, Lauriston must be met and warned.

The taxi-cab made good headway along the Marylebone and Euston Roads, and the hands of the clock over the entrance to King's Cross had not yet indicated a quarter past nine when Zillah was set down close by. She hurried into the station, and to the arrival platform. All the way along in the cab she had been wondering what to do when she met Lauriston—not as to what she should tell him, for that was already settled, but as to what to advise him to do about following Ayseough's suggestion and keeping out of the way, for awhile. She had already seen enough of him to know that he was naturally of high spirit and courage, and that he would hate the very idea of hiding, or of seeming to run away. Yet, what other course was open if he wished to avoid arrest? Zillah, during her short business experience had been brought in contact with the police authorities and their methods more than once, and she knew that there is nothing the professional detective likes so much as to follow the obvious—as the easiest and safest. She had been quick to appreciate all that Ayseough told her—she knew how the police mind would reason about it: it would be quite enough for it to know that on the rings which Andy Lauriston said were his there were marks which were certainly identical with those on her grandfather's property: now that the police authorities were in possession of that fact, they would go for Lauriston without demur or hesitation, leaving all the other mysteries and ramification of the Multenius affair to be

sorted, or to sort themselves, at leisure. One thing was certain—Andie Lauriston was in greater danger now than at any moment since Ayscough found him leaving the shop, and she must save him—against his own inclinations if need be.

But before the train from the North was due, Zillah was fated to have yet another experience. She had taken up a position directly beneath a powerful lamp at the end of the arrival platform, so that Lauriston, who would be obliged to pass that way, could not fail to see her. Suddenly turning, to glance at the clock in the roof behind her, she was aware of a man, young, tall, athletic, deeply bronzed, as from long contact with the Southern sun, who stood just behind a knot of loungers, his heavy overcoat and the jacket beneath it thrown open, feeling in his waistcoat pockets as if for his match-box—an unlighted cigar protruded from the corner of his rather grim, determined lips. But it was not at lips, nor at the cigar, nor at the searching fingers that Zillah looked, after that first comprehensive glance—her eyes went straight to an object which shone in the full glare of the lamp above her head. The man wore an old-fashioned, double-breasted fancy waistcoat, but so low as to reveal a good deal of his shirt-front. And in that space, beneath his bird's-eye blue tie, loosely knotted in a bow, Zillah saw a stud, which her experienced eyes knew to be of platinum, and on it was engraved the same curious device which she had seen once before that day—on the solitaire exhibited by Melky.

The girl was instantly certain that here was the man who had visited Mrs. Goldmark's eating-house. Her first

instinct was to challenge him with the fact—but as she half moved towards him, he found his match-box, struck a match, and began to light his cigar. And just then came the great engine of the express, panting its way to a halt beside them, and with it the folk on the platform began to stir, and Zillah was elbowed aside. Her situation was perplexing—was she to watch the man and perhaps lose Lauriston in the crowd already passing from the train, or—

The man was still leisurely busy with his cigar, and Zillah turned and went a few steps up the platform. She suddenly caught sight of Lauriston, and running towards him gripped his arm, and drew him to the lamp. But in that moment of indecision, the man had vanished.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MR. STUYVESANT GUYLER

Lauriston, surprised beyond a little at seeing Zillah, found his surprise turned into amazement as she seized his arm and forced him along the platform, careless of the groups of passengers and the porters, crowding about the baggage vans.

“What is it?” he demanded. “Has something happened? Where are we going?”

But Zillah held on determinedly, her eyes fixed ahead.

“Quick!” she said, pantingly. “A man I saw just now! He was there—he’s gone—while I looked for you. We must find him! He must have gone this way. Andie!—look for him! A tall, clean-shaven man in a slouched hat and a heavy travelling coat—a foreigner of some sort. Oh, look!”

It was the first time she had called Lauriston by his name, and he gave her arm an involuntary pressure as they hastened along.

“But why?” he asked. “Who is he—what do you want with him? What’s it all about?”

“Oh, find him!” she exclaimed. “You don’t know how important it is! If I lose sight of him now, I’ll very likely never see him again. And he must be found—and stopped—for your sake!”

They had come to the end of the platform by that

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time, and Lauriston looked left and right in search of the man described. Suddenly he twisted Zillah round.

"Is that he—that fellow talking to another man?" he asked. "See him—there?"

"Yes!" said Zillah. She saw the man of the platinum stud again, and on seeing him, stopped dead where she was, holding Lauriston back. The man, leisurely smoking his cigar, was chatting to another man, who, from the fact that he was carrying a small suit-case in one hand and a rug over the other arm, had evidently come in by the just-arrived express. "Yes!" she continued. "That's the man! And—we've just got to follow him wherever he goes!"

"What on earth for?" asked Lauriston. "What mystery's this? Who is he?"

At that moment the two men parted, with a cordial handshake; the man of the suit-case and the rug turned towards the stairs which led to the underground railway; the other man walked slowly away through the front of the station in the direction of the Great Northern Hotel. And Zillah immediately dragged Lauriston after him, keeping a few yards' distance, but going persistently forward. The man in front crossed the road, and strode towards the portico of the hotel—and Zillah suddenly made up her mind.

"We've got to speak to that man!" she said. "Don't ask why, now—you'll know in a few minutes. Ask him if he'll speak to me?"

Lauriston caught up the stranger as he set foot on the steps leading to the hotel door. He felt uncomfortable and foolish—but Zillah's tone left him no option but to obey.

"I beg your pardon," said Lauriston, as politely as possible, "but—this lady is very anxious to speak to you."

The man turned, glanced at Zillah, who had hurried up, and lifted his slouched hat with a touch of old-fashioned courtesy. There was a strong light burning just above them: in its glare all three looked at each other. The stranger smiled—a little wonderingly.

"Why, sure!" he said in accents that left no doubt of his American origin. "I'd be most happy. You're not mistaking me for somebody else?"

Zillah was already flushed with embarrassment. Now that she had run her quarry to earth, and so easily, she scarcely knew what to do with it.

"You'll think this very strange," she said, stammeringly, "but if you don't mind telling me something?—you see, I saw you just now in the station, when you were feeling for your match-box, and I noticed that you wore a platinum stud—with an unusual device on it."

The American laughed—a good-natured, genial laugh—and threw open his coat. At the same moment he thrust his wrists forward.

"This stud!" he said. "That's so!—it is platinum, and the device is curious. And the device is right there, too, see—on those solitaire cuff-studs! But—"

He paused looking at Zillah, whose eyes were now fastened on the cuff-studs, and who was obviously so astonished as to have lost her tongue.

"You seemed mighty amazed at my studs!" said the stranger, with another laugh. "Now, you'll just excuse me if I ask—why?"

Zillah regained her wits with an effort, and became as business-like as usual.

"Don't, please, think I'm asking idle and purposeless questions," she said. "Have you been long in London?"

"A few days only," answered the stranger, readily enough.

"Have you read of what's already called the Praed Street Murder in the papers?" continued Zillah.

"Yes—I read that," the stranger said, his face growing serious. "The affair of the old man—the pawnbroker with the odd name. Yes!"

"I'm the old man's granddaughter," said Zillah, brusquely. "Now, I'll tell you why I was upset by seeing your platinum stud. A solitaire stud, made of platinum, and ornamented with exactly the same device as yours, was found in our parlour after my grandfather's death—and another, evidently the fellow to it, was found in an eating-house, close by. Now, do you understand why I wished to speak to you?"

While Zillah spoke, the American's face had been growing graver and graver, and when she made an end, he glanced at Lauriston and shook his head.

"Say!" he said. "That's a very serious matter! You're sure the device was the same, and the material platinum?"

"I've been reared in the jewellery trade," replied Zillah. "The things I'm talking of are of platinum—and the device is precisely the same as that on your stud."

"Well!—that's mighty queer!" remarked the American. "I can't tell you why it's queer, all in a minute, but I do assure you it's just about the queerest thing I

ever heard of in my life—and I've known a lot of queer-ness. Look here!—I'm stopping at this hotel—will you come in with me, and we'll just get a quiet corner and talk some? Come right in, then."

He led the way into the hotel, through the hall, and down a corridor from which several reception rooms opened. Looking into one, a small smoking lounge, and finding it empty, he ushered them aside. But on the threshold Zillah paused. Her business instincts were by this time fully aroused. She felt certain that whoever this stranger might be, he had nothing to do with the affair in Praed Street, and yet might be able to throw extraordinary light on it, and she wanted to take a great step towards clearing it up. She turned to the American.

"Look here!" she said. "I've told you what I'm after, and who I am. This gentleman is Mr. Andrew Lauriston. Did you read his name in the paper's account of that inquest?"

The American glanced at Lauriston with some curiosity.

"Sure!" he answered. "The man that found the old gentleman dead."

"Just so," said Zillah. "There are two friends of ours making enquiries on Mr. Lauriston's behalf at this moment. One of them's my cousin, Mr. Rubinstein; the other's Mr. Purdie, an old friend of Mr. Lauriston's. I've an idea where'll they'll be, just now—do you mind if I telephone them to come here, at once, so that they can hear what you have to tell us?"

"Not in the least!" assented the American heartily. "I'll be glad to help in any way I can—I'm interested.

Here!—there's a telephone box right there—you go in now, and call those fellows up and tell 'em to come right along, quick!"

He and Lauriston waited while Zillah went into the telephone box: she felt sure that Melky and Purdie would have returned to Praed Street by that time, and she rang up Mrs. Goldmark at the Pawnshop to enquire. Within a minute or two she had rejoined Lauriston and the American—during her absence the stranger had been speaking to a waiter, and he now led his two guests to a private sitting-room.

"We'll be more private in this apartment," he observed. "No fear of interruption or being overheard. I've told the waiter man there's two gentlemen coming along, and they're to be brought in here as soon as they land. Will they be long?"

"They'll be here within twenty minutes," answered Zillah. "It's very kind of you to take so much trouble!"

The American drew an easy chair to the fire, and pointed Zillah to it.

"Well," he remarked, "I guess that in a fix of this sort, you can't take too much trouble! I'm interested in this case—and a good deal more than interested now that you tell me about these platinum studs. I reckon I can throw some light on that, anyway! But we'll keep it till your friends come. And I haven't introduced myself—my name's Stuyvesant Guyler. I'm, a New York man—but I've knocked around some—pretty considerable, in fact. Say!—have you got any idea that this mystery of yours is at all connected with South Africa? And—incidentally—with diamonds?"

Zillah started and glanced at Lauriston.

"What makes you think of South Africa—and of diamonds?" she asked.

"Oh, well—but that comes into my tale," answered Guyler. "You'll see in due course. But—had it?"

"I hadn't thought of diamonds, but I certainly had of South Africa," admitted Zillah.

"Seems to be working in both directions," said Guyler, meditatively. "But you'll see that when I tell you what I know."

Purdie and Melky Rubinstein entered the room within the twenty minutes which Zillah had predicted—full of wonder to find her and Lauriston in company with a total stranger. But Zillah explained matters in a few words, and forbade any questioning until Mr. Stuyvesant Guyler had told his story.

"And before I get on to that," said Guyler, who had been quietly scrutinizing his two new visitors while Zillah explained the situation, "I'd just like to see that platinum solitaire that Mr. Rubinstein picked up—if he's got it about him?"

Melky thrust a hand into a pocket.

"It ain't never been off me, mister, since I found it!" he said, producing a little packet wrapped in tissue paper. "There you are!"

Guyler took the stud which Melky handed to him and laid it on the table around which they were all sitting. After glancing at it for a moment, he withdrew the studs from his own wrist-bands and laid them by its side.

"Yes, that's sure one of the lot!" he observed mus-

ingly. "I guess there's no possible doubt at all on that point. Well!—this is indeed mighty queer! Now, I'll tell you straight out. These studs—all of 'em—are parts of six sets of similar things, all made of that very expensive metal, platinum, in precisely the same fashion, and ornamented with the same specially invented device, and given to six men who had been of assistance to him in a big deal, as a little mark of his appreciation, by a man that some few years ago made a fortune in South Africa. That's so!"

Zillah turned on the American with a sharp look of enquiry.

"Who was he?" she demanded. "Tell us his name!"

"His name," replied Guyler, "was Spencer Levendale—dealer in diamonds."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PURDIE STANDS FIRM

The effect produced by this announcement was evidently exactly that which the American expected, and he smiled, a little grimly, as he looked from one face to another. As for his hearers, they first looked at each other and then at him, and Guyler laughed and went on.

“That makes you jump!” he said. “Well, now, at the end of that inquest business in the papers the other day I noticed Spencer Levendale’s name mentioned in connection with some old book that was left, or found in Mr. Daniel Multenius’s back-parlour. Of course, I concluded that he was the same Spencer Levendale I’d known out there in South Africa, five years ago. And to tell you the truth, I’ve been watching your papers, morning and evening, since, to see if there was any more news of him. But so far I haven’t seen any.”

Purdie and Melky exchanged glances, and in response to an obvious hint from Melky, Purdie spoke.

“We can give you some news, then,” he said. “It’ll be common property tomorrow morning. Levendale has mysteriously disappeared from his house, and from his usual haunts!—and nobody knows where he is. And it’s considered that this disappearance has something to do with the Praed Street affair.”

“Sure!” assented Guyler. “That’s just about a dead certainty. And in the Praed Street affair, these platinum

stud things are going to play a good part, and when you and your police have got to the bottom of it, you'll sure find that something else has a big part, too!"

"What?" asked Purdie.

"Why, diamonds!" answered the American, with a quiet smile. "Just diamonds! Diamonds'll be at the bottom of the bag—sure!"

There was a moment of surprised silence, and then Melky turned eagerly to the American.

"Mister!" he said. "Let's be getting at something! What do you know, now, about this here Levendale?"

"Not much," replied Guyler. "But I'm open to tell what I do know. I've been a bit of a rolling stone, do you see—knocked about the world, pretty considerable, doing one thing and another, and I've falsified the old saying, for I've contrived to gather a good bit of moss in my rollings. Well, now, I was located in Cape Town for a while, some five years ago, and I met Spencer Levendale there. He was then a dealer in diamonds—can't say in what way exactly—for I never exactly knew—but it was well known that he'd made a big pile, buying and selling these goods, and he was a very rich man. Now I and five other men—all of different nationalities—were very useful to Levendale in a big deal that he was anxious to carry through—never mind what it was—and he felt pretty grateful to us, I reckon. And as we were all warmish men so far as money was concerned, it wasn't the sort of thing that he could hand out cheques for, so he hit on the notion of having sets of studs made of platinum—which is, as you're aware, the most valuable metal known, and on every stud he had a device

of his own invention carefully engraved. Here's my set!—and what Mr. Rubinstein's got there is part of another. Now, then, who's the man who's been dropping his cuff-links about?"

Purdie, who had listened with deep attention to the American's statement, immediately put a question.

"That's but answered by asking you something," he said. "You no doubt know the names of the men to whom those sets of studs were given?"

But to Purdie's disappointment, the American shook his head.

"Well, now, I just don't!" he replied. "The fact is—as you would understand if you knew the circumstances—this was a queer sort of a secret deal, in which the assistance of various men of different nationality was wanted, and none of us knew any of the rest. However, I did come across the Englishman who was in it—afterwards. Recognized him, as a matter of fact, by his being in possession of those studs."

"And who was he?" asked Purdie.

"A man named Purvis—Stephen Purvis," answered Guyler. "Sort of man like myself—knocked around, taking up this and that, as long as there was money in it. I came across him in Johannesburg, maybe a year after that deal I was telling of. He didn't know who the other fellows were, neither."

"You've never seen him since?" suggested Purdie. "You don't know where he is?"

"Not a ghost of a notion!" said Guyler. "Didn't talk with him more than once, and then only for an hour or so."

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"Mister!" exclaimed Melky, eagerly. "Could you describe this here Purvis, now? Just a bit of a description, like?"

"Sure!" answered the American. "That is—as I remember him. Biggish, raw-boned, hard-bitten sort of a man—about my age—clean-shaven—looked more of a Colonial than an Englishman—he'd been out in South Africa, doing one thing and another, since he was a boy."

"S'elp me if that doesn't sound like the man who was in Mrs. Goldmark's restaurant!" said Melky. "Just what she describes, anyhow!"

"Why, certainly—I reckon that is the man," remarked Guyler. "That's what I've been figuring on, all through. I tell you all this mystery is around some diamond affair in which this lady's grandfather, and Mr. Spencer Levendale, and this man Purvis have been mixed up—sure! And the thing—in my humble opinion—is to find both of them! Now, then, what's been done, and what's being done, in that way?"

Melky nodded at Purdie, as much as to invite him to speak.

"The authorities at New Scotland Yard have the Levendale affair in hand," said Purdie. "We've been in and out there, with Mr. Multenius's solicitor, all the afternoon and evening. But, of course, we couldn't tell anything about this other man because we didn't know anything, till now. You'll have no objection to going there tomorrow?"

"Not at all!" replied Guyler, cheerfully. "I'm located at this hotel for a week or two. I struck it when I came here from the North, a few days back, and it suits

me very well, and I guess I'll just stop here while I'm in London this journey. No, I've no objection to take a hand. But—it seems to me—there's still a lot of difficulty about this young gentleman here—Mr. Lauriston. I read all the papers carefully, and sized up his predicament. Those rings, now?"

Zillah suddenly remembered all that Ayscough had told her that evening. She had forgotten the real motive of her visit to King's Cross in her excitement in listening to the American's story. She now turned to Purdie and the other two.

"I'd forgotten!" she exclaimed. "The danger's still there. Ayscough's been at the shop tonight. The police have had an expert examining those rings, and the rings in the tray. He says there are marks—private, jewellers' marks in the two rings which correspond with marks in our rings. In fact, there's no doubt of it. And now, the police are certain that the two rings did belong to our tray—and—and they're bent on arresting—Andie!"

Lauriston flushed hotly with sheer indignation.

"That's all nonsense—what the police say!" he exclaimed. "I've found out who gave those two rings to my mother! I can prove it! I don't care a hang for the police and their marks—those rings are mine!"

Purdie laid a quiet hand on Lauriston's arm.

"None of us know yet what you've done or found out at Peebles about the rings," he said. "Tell us! Just give us the brief facts."

"I'm going to," answered Lauriston, still indignant. "I thought the whole thing over as I went down in the

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train. I remembered that if there was one person living in Peebles who would be likely to know about my mother and those rings, it would be an old friend of hers, Mrs. Taggart—you know her, John."

"I know Mrs. Taggart—go on," said Purdie.

"I didn't know if Mrs. Taggart was still living," continued Lauriston. "But I was out early this morning and I found her. She remembers the rings well enough: she described them accurately—what's more she told me what I didn't know—how they came into my mother's possession. You know as well as I do, John, that my father and mother weren't over well off—and my mother used to make a bit of extra money by letting her rooms to summer visitors. One summer she had a London solicitor, a Mr. Killick, staying there for a month—at least he came for a month, but he was taken ill, and he was there more than two months. My mother nursed him through his illness—and after he'd returned to London, he sent her those rings. And—if there are marks on them," concluded Lauriston, "that correspond with marks on the rings in that tray, all I have to say is that those marks must have been there when Mr. Killick bought them!—for they've never been out of our possession—my mother's and mine—until I took them to pawn."

Zillah suddenly clapped her hands—and she and Melky exchanged significant glances which the others did not understand.

"That's it!" she exclaimed. "That's what puzzled me at first. Now I'm not puzzled any more. Melky knows what I mean."

"What she means, mister," assented Melky, tapping

Purdie's arm, "is precisely what struck me at once. It's just as Mr. Lauriston here says—them private marks were on the rings when Mr. Killick bought them. Them two rings, and some of the rings in the tray what's been mentioned all come from the same maker! There ain't nothing wonderful in all that to me and my cousin Zillah there!—we've been brought up in the trade, d'ye see? But the police!—they're that suspicious that—well, the thing to do, gentlemen, is to find this here Mr. Killick."

"Just so," agreed Purdie. "Where is he to be found, Andie?"

But Lauriston shook his head, disappointedly.

"That's just what I don't know!" he answered. "It's five and twenty years since he gave my mother those rings, and according to Mrs. Taggart, he was then a middle-aged man, so he's now getting on in years. But—if he's alive, I can find him."

"We've got to find him," said Purdie, firmly. "In my opinion, he can give some evidence that'll be of more importance than the mere identifying of those rings—never mind what it is I'm thinking of, now. We must see to that tomorrow."

"But in the meantime," broke in Zillah. "Andie must not go home—to Mrs. Flitwick's! I know what Ayscough meant tonight—and remember, all of you, it was private between him and myself. If he goes home, he may be arrested, any minute. He must be kept out of the way of the police for a bit, and—"

Purdie rose from the table and shook his head determinedly.

"No," he said. "None of that! We're going to have

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no running away, no hiding! Andie Lauriston's not going to show the least fear of the police, or of any of their theories. He's just going to follow my orders—and I'm going to take him to my hotel for the night—leave him to me! I'm going to see this thing right through to the finish—however it ends. Now, let's separate. Mr. Guyler!"

"Sir?" answered the American. "At your service."

"Then meet me at my hotel tomorrow morning at ten," said Purdie. "There's a new chapter to open."

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE PARSELETT AFFAIR

At a quarter past ten o'clock on the morning following Ayscough's revelation to Zillah, the detective was closeted with a man from the Criminal Investigation Department at New Scotland Yard in a private room at the local police station, and with them was the superior official who had been fetched to the pawnshop in Praed Street immediately after the discovery of Daniel Multenius's body by Andie Lauriston. And this official was stating his view of the case to the two detectives—conscious that neither agreed with him.

"You can't get over the similarity of the markings of those rings!" he said confidently. "To my mind the whole thing's as plain as a pikestaff—the young fellow was hard up—he confessed he hadn't a penny on him!—he went in there, found the shop empty, saw those rings, grabbed a couple, was interrupted by the old man—and finished him off by seragging him! That's my opinion! And I advise getting a warrant for him and getting on with the work—all the rest of this business belongs to something else."

Ayscough silently glanced at the man from New Scotland Yard—who shook his head in a decided negative.

"That's not my opinion!" he said with decision. "And it's not the opinion of the people at headquarters.

We were at this affair nearly all yesterday afternoon with that little Jew fellow, Rubinstein, and the young Scotch gentleman, Mr. Purdie, and our conclusion is that there's something of a big sort behind old Multenius's death. There's a regular web of mystery! The old man's death—that book, which Levendale did not leave in the 'bus, in spite of all he says, and of his advertisements!—Levendale's unexplained disappearance—the strange death of this man Parslett—the mystery of those platinum studs dropped in the pawnbroker's parlour and in Mrs. Goldmark's eating house—no!—the whole affair's a highly complicated one. That's my view of it."

"And mine," said Ayscough. He looked at the unbelieving official, and turned away from him to glance out of the window into the street. "May I never!" he suddenly exclaimed. "There's young Lauriston coming here, and Purdie with him—and a fellow who looks like an American. I should say Lauriston's got proof about his title to those rings—anyway, he seems to have no fear about showing himself here—case of walking straight into the lions' den, eh?"

"Bring 'em all in!" ordered the superior official, a little surlily. "Let's hear what it's all about!"

Purdie presently appeared in Ayscough's rear, preceding his two companions. He and the detective from New Scotland Yard exchanged nods; they had seen a good deal of each other the previous day. He nodded also to the superior official—but the superior official looked at Lauriston.

"Got that proof about those rings?" he enquired. "Of course, if you have—"

"Before Mr. Lauriston says anything about that," interrupted Purdie, "I want you to hear a story which this gentleman, Mr. Stuyvesant Guyler, of New York, can tell you. It's important—it bears right on this affair. If you just listen to what he can tell—"

The two detectives listened to Guyler's story about the platinum studs with eager, if silent interest: in the end they glanced at each other and then at the local official, who seemed to be going through a process of being convinced against his will."

"Just what I said a few minutes ago," muttered the New Scotland Yard man. "A highly complicated affair! Not going to be got at in five minutes."

"Nor in ten!" said Ayscough laconically. He glanced at Guyler. "You could identify this man Purvis if you saw him?" he asked.

"Why, certainly!" answered the American. "I guess if he's the man who was seen in that eating-house the other day he's not altered any—or not much."

The man at the desk turned to Purdie, glancing at Lauriston.

"About those rings?" he asked. "What's Mr. Lauriston got to say?"

"Let me tell," said Purdie, as Lauriston was about to speak. "Mr. Lauriston," he went on, "has been to Peebles, where his father and mother lived. He has seen an old friend of theirs, Mrs. Taggart, who remembers the rings perfectly. Moreover, she knows that they were given to the late Mrs. Lauriston by a Mr. Edward Killick, a London solicitor, who, of course, will be able to identify them. As to the marks, I think you'll find a

trade explanation of that—those rings and the rings in Multenius's tray probably came from the same maker. Now, I find, on looking through the directory, that this Mr. Edward Killick has retired from practice, but I've also found out where he now lives, and I propose to bring him here. In the meantime—I want to know what you're going to do about Mr. Lauriston? Here he is!"

The superior official glanced at the New Scotland Yard man.

"I suppose your people have taken this job entirely in hand, now?" he asked.

"Entirely!" answered the detective.

"Got any instructions about Mr. Lauriston?" asked the official. "You haven't? Mr. Lauriston's free to go where he likes, then, as far as we're concerned, here," he added, turning to Purdie. "But—he'd far better stay at hand till all this is cleared up."

"That's our intention," said Purdie. "Whenever you want Mr. Lauriston, come to me at my hotel—he's my guest there, and I'll produce him. Now we're going to find Mr. Killick."

He and Lauriston and Guyler walked out together; on the steps of the police-station Ayscough called him back.

"I say!" he said, confidentially. "Leave that Mr. Killick business alone for an hour or two. I can tell you of something much more interesting than that, and possibly of more importance. Go round to the Coroner's Court—Mr. Lauriston knows where it is."

"What's on?" asked Lauriston.

"Inquest on that man Parslett," replied Ayscough

with a meaning nod. "You'll hear some queer evidence if I'm not mistaken. I'm going there myself, presently."

He turned in again, and the three young men looked at each other.

"Say!" remarked Guyler, "I reckon that's good advice. Let's go to this court."

Lauriston led them to the scene of his own recent examination by Mr. Parminter. But on this occasion the court was crowded; it was with great difficulty that they contrived to squeeze themselves into a corner of it. In another corner, but far away from their own, Lauriston saw Melky Rubinstein; Melky, wedged in, and finding it impossible to move, made a grimace at Lauriston and jerked his thumb in the direction of the door, as a signal that he would meet him there when the proceedings were over.

The inquest had already begun when Purdie and his companions forced their way into the court. In the witness-box was the dead man's widow—a pathetic figure in heavy mourning, who was telling the Coroner that on the night of her husband's death he went out late in the evening—just to take a walk round, as he expressed it. No—she had no idea whatever of where he was going, nor if he had any particular object in going out at all. He had not said one word to her about going out to get money from any one. After he went out she never saw him again until she was fetched to St. Mary's Hospital, where she found him in the hands of the doctors. He died, without having regained consciousness, just after she reached the hospital.

Nothing very startling so far, thought Purdie, at the

end of the widow's evidence, and he wondered why Ayscough had sent them round. But more interest came with the next witness—a smart, bustling, middle-aged man, evidently a well-to-do business man, who entered the box pretty much as if he had been sitting down in his own office, to ring his bell and ask for the day's letters. A whisper running round the court informed the on-lookers that this was the gentleman who picked Parslett up in the street. Purdie and his two companions pricked their ears.

Martin James Gardiner—turf commission agent—resident in Portsdown Road, Maida Vale. Had lived there several years—knew the district well—did not know the dead man by sight at all—had never seen him, that he knew of, until the evening in question.

“Tell us exactly what happened, Mr. Gardiner—in your own way,” said the Coroner.

Mr. Gardiner leaned over the front of the witness-box, and took the court and the public into his confidence—genially.

“I was writing letters until pretty late that night,” he said. “A little after eleven o'clock I went out to post them at the nearest pillar-box. As I went down the steps of my house, the deceased passed by. He was walking down Portsdown Road in the direction of Clifton Road. As he passed me, he was chuckling—laughing in a low tone. I thought he was—well, a bit intoxicated when I heard that, but as I was following him pretty closely, I soon saw that he walked straight enough. He kept perhaps six or eight yards in front of me until we had come to within twenty yards or so of the corner of

Clifton Road. Then, all of a sudden—so suddenly that it's difficult for me to describe it!—he seemed to—well, there's no other word for it than—collapse. He seemed to give, you understand—shrank up, like—like a concertina being suddenly shut up! His knees gave—his whole body seemed to shrink—and he fell in a heap on the pavement!”

“Did he cry out—scream, as if in sudden pain—anything of that sort?” asked the Coroner.

“There was a sort of gurgling sound—I'm not sure that he didn't say a word or two, as he collapsed,” answered the witness. “But it was so sudden that I couldn't catch anything definite. He certainly never made the slightest sound, except a queer sort of moaning, very low, from the time he fell. Of course, I thought the man had fallen in a fit. I rushed to him; he was lying, sort of crumpled up, where he had fallen. There was a street-lamp close by—I saw that his face had turned a queer colour, and his eyes were already closed—tightly. I noticed, too, that his teeth were clenched, and his fingers twisted into the palms of his hands.”

“Was he writhing at all—making any movement?” enquired the Coroner.

“Not a movement! He was as still as the stones he was lying on!” said the witness. “I'm dead certain he never moved after he fell. There was nobody about, just then, and I was just going to ring the bell of the nearest house when a policeman came round the corner. I shouted to him—he came up. We examined the man for a minute; then I ran to fetch Dr. Mirandolet, whose surgery is close by there. I found him in; he came at

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once, and immediately ordered the man's removal to the hospital. The policeman got help, and the man was taken off. Dr. Mirandolet went with him. I returned home."

No questions of any importance were asked of Mr. Gardiner, and the Coroner, after a short interchange of whispers with his officer, glanced at a group of professional-looking men behind the witness-box.

"Call Dr. Mirandolet!" he directed.

Purdie at that moment caught Ayscough's eye. And the detective winked at him significantly as a strange and curious figure came out from the crowd and stepped into the witness-box.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WHAT MANNER OF DEATH?

One of the three companions who stood curiously gazing at the new witness as he came into full view of the court had seen him before. Lauriston, who, during his residence in Paddington, had wandered a good deal about Maida Vale and St. John's Wood, instantly recognized Dr. Mirandolet as a man whom he had often met or passed in those excursions and about whom he had just as often wondered. He was a notable and somewhat queer figure—a tall, spare man, of striking presence and distinctive personality—the sort of man who would inevitably attract attention wherever he was, and at whom people would turn to look in the most crowded street. His aquiline features, almost cadaverous complexion, and flashing, deep-set eyes, were framed in a mass of raven-black hair which fell in masses over a loosely fitting, unstarched collar, kept in its place by a voluminous black silk cravat; his thin figure, all the sparer in appearance because of his broad shoulders and big head, was wrapped from head to foot in a mighty cloak, raven-black as his hair, from the neck of which depended a hood-like cape. Not a man in that court would have taken Dr. Mirandolet for anything but a foreigner, and for a foreigner who knew next to nothing of England and the English, and John Purdie, whose in-

terest was now thoroughly aroused, was surprised as he heard the witness's answer to the necessary preliminary questions.

Nicholas Mirandolet—British subject—born in Malta—educated in England—a licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons and of the Royal College of Physicians—in private practice at Portsdown Road, Maida Vale, for the last ten years.

“I believe you were called to the deceased by the last witness, Dr. Mirandolet?” asked the Coroner. “Just so! Will you tell us what you found?”

“I found the deceased lying on the pavement, about a dozen yards from my house,” answered Dr. Mirandolet, in a sharp, staccato voice. “A policeman was bending over him. Mr. Gardiner hurriedly told us what he had seen. My first thought was that the man was in what is commonly termed a fit—some form of epileptic seizure, you know. I hastily examined him—and found that my first impression was utterly wrong.”

“What did you think—then?” enquired the Coroner.

Dr. Mirandolet paused and began to drum the edge of the witness-box with the tips of his long, slender white fingers. He pursed his clean-shaven lips and looked meditatively around him—leisurely surveying the faces turned on him. Finally he glanced at the Coroner, and snapped out a reply.

“I do not know what I thought!”

The Coroner looked up from his notes—in surprise.

“You—don’t know what you thought?” he asked.

“No!” said Dr. Mirandolet. “I don’t. And I will tell you why. Because I realized—more quickly than it

takes me to tell it—that here was something that was utterly beyond my comprehension!”

“Do you mean—beyond your skill?” suggested the Coroner.

“Skill?” retorted the witness, with a queer, twisting grimace. “Beyond my understanding! I am a quick observer—I saw within a few seconds that here was a man who had literally been struck down in the very flush of life as if—well, to put it plainly, as if some extraordinary power had laid a blasting finger on the very life-centre within him. I was—dumfounded!”

The Coroner sat up and laid aside his pen.

“What did you do?” he asked quietly.

“Bade the policeman get help, and an ambulance, and hurry the man to St. Mary’s Hospital, all as quickly as possible,” answered Dr. Mirandolet. “While the policeman was away, I examined the man more closely. He was dying then—and I knew very well that nothing known to medical science could save him. By that time he had become perfectly quiet; his body had relaxed into a normal position; his face, curiously coloured when I first saw it, had become placid and pale; he breathed regularly, though very faintly—and he was steadily dying. I knew quite well what was happening, and I remarked to Mr. Gardiner that the man would be dead within half-an-hour.”

“I believe you got him to the hospital within that time?” asked the Coroner.

“Yes—within twenty-five minutes of my first seeing him,” said the witness. “I went with the ambulance. The man died very soon after admission, just as I knew

he would. No medical power on earth could have saved him!"

The Coroner glanced at the little knot of professional men in the rear of the witness-box and seemed to be debating within himself as to whether he wanted to ask Dr. Mirandolet any more questions. Eventually he turned again to him.

"What your evidence amounts to, Dr. Mirandolet, is this," he said. "You were called to the man and you saw at once that you yourself could do nothing for him, so you got him away to the hospital as quickly as you possibly could. Just so!—now, why did you think you could do nothing for him?"

"I will tell you—in plain words," answered Dr. Mirandolet. "Because I did not recognize or understand one single symptom that I saw! Because, frankly, I knew very well that I did not know what was the matter! And so—I hurried him to people who ought to know more than I do and are reputedly cleverer than I am. In short—I recognized that I was in the presence of something—something!—utterly beyond my skill and comprehension!"

"Let me ask you one or two further questions," said the Coroner. "Have you formed any opinion of your own as to the cause of this man's death?"

"Yes!" agreed the witness, unhesitatingly. "I have! I believe him to have been poisoned—in a most subtle and cunning fashion. And"—here Dr. Mirandolet cast a side-glance at the knot of men behind him—"I shall be intensely surprised if that opinion is not corroborated. But—I shall be ten thousand times more sur-

prised if there is any expert in Europe who can say what that poison was!"

"You think it was a secret poison?" suggested the Coroner.

"Secret!" exclaimed Dr. Mirandolet. "Aye—secret is the word. Secret—yes! And—sure!"

"Is there anything else you can tell us?" asked the Coroner.

"Only this," replied the witness, after a pause. "It may be material. As I bent over this man as he lay there on the pavement I detected a certain curious aromatic odour about his clothes. It was strong at first; it gradually wore off. But I directed the attention of the policeman and Mr. Gardiner to it; it was still hanging about him, very faintly, when we got him to the hospital: I drew attention to it there."

"It evidently struck you—that curious odour?" said the Coroner.

"Yes," answered Dr. Mirandolet. "It did. It reminded me of the East—I have lived in the East—India, Burmah, China. It seemed to me that this man had got hold of some Eastern scent, and possibly spilt some on his clothes. The matter is worth noting. Because—I have heard—I cannot say I have known—of men being poisoned in inhalation."

The Coroner made no remark—it was very evident from his manner that he considered Dr. Mirandolet's evidence somewhat mystifying. And Dr. Mirandolet stepped down—and in response to the official invitation Dr. John Sperling-Lawson walked into the vacated witness-box.

"One of the greatest authorities on poisons living," whispered Lauriston to Purdie, while Dr. Sperling-Lawson was taking the oath and answering the formal questions. "He's principal pathologist at that hospital they're talking about, and he constantly figures in cases of this sort. He's employed by the Home Office too—it was he who gave such important evidence in that Barnsbury murder case not so long since—don't you remember it?"

Purdie did remember, and he looked at the famous expert with great interest. There was, however, nothing at all remarkable about Dr. Sperling-Lawson's appearance—he was a quiet, self-possessed, plain-faced gentleman who might have been a barrister or a banker for all that any one could tell to the contrary. He gave his evidence in a matter-of-fact tone—strongly in contrast to Dr. Mirandolet's somewhat excited answers—but Purdie noticed that the people in court listened eagerly for every word.

He happened to be at the hospital, said Dr. Sperling-Lawson, when the man Parslett was brought in, and he saw him die. He fully agreed with Dr. Mirandolet that it was impossible to do anything to save the man's life when he was brought to the hospital, and he was quite prepared to say that the impossibility had existed from the moment in which Gardiner had seen Parslett collapse. In other words, when Parslett did collapse, death was on him.

"And—the cause of death?" asked the Coroner.

"Heart failure," replied the witness.

"Resulting from—what?" continued the Coroner.

Dr. Sperling-Lawson hesitated a moment—amidst a deep silence.

“I cannot answer that question,” he said at last. “I can only offer an opinion. I believe—in fact, I am sure!—the man was poisoned. I am convinced he was poisoned. But I am forced to admit that I do not know what poison was used, and that after a most careful search I have not yet been able to come across any trace or sign of any poison known to me. All the same, I am sure he died from the effects of poison, but what it was, or how administered, frankly, I do not know!”

“You made a post-mortem examination?” asked the Coroner.

“Yes,” replied the specialist, “in company with Dr. Seracold. The deceased was a thoroughly healthy, well-nourished man. There was not a trace of disease in any of the organs—he was evidently a temperate man, and likely to live to over the seventy years’ period. And, as I have said, there was not a trace of poison. That is, not a trace of any poison known to me.”

“I want to ask you a particularly important question,” said the Coroner. “Are there poisons, the nature of which you are unacquainted with?”

“Yes!” answered the specialist frankly. “There are. But—I should not expect to hear of their use in London.”

“Is there any European expert who might throw some light on this case?” asked the Coroner.

“Yes,” said Dr. Sperling-Lawson. “One man—Professor Gagnard, of Paris. As a matter of fact, I have already sent certain portions of certain organs to him—by a special messenger. If he cannot trace this poison,

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then no European nor American specialist can. I am sure of this—the secret is an Eastern one.”

“Gentlemen,” said the Coroner, “we will adjourn for a week. By that time there may be a report from Paris.”

The crowd surged out into the damp November morning, eagerly discussing the evidence just given. Purdie, Lauriston, and Guyler, all equally mystified, followed, already beginning to speculate and to theorize. Suddenly Melky Rubinstein hurried up to them, waving a note.

“There was a fellow waiting outside with this from Zillah,” said Melky. “She’d heard you were all here, and she knew I was. We’re to go there at once—she’s found some letters to her grandfather from that man Purvis! Come on!—it’s another step forward!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MR. KILLICK GOES BACK

Ayscough and the man from New Scotland Yard came out of the court at that moment in close and serious conversation: Melky Rubinstein left the other three, and hurried to the two detectives with his news; together, the six men set off for Praed Street. And Purdie, who by this time was developing as much excited interest as his temperament and business habits permitted, button-holed the Scotland Yard man and walked alongside him.

"What's your professional opinion about what we've just heard in there?" he asked. "Between ourselves, of course."

The detective, who had already had several long conversations with Purdie at headquarters during the previous afternoon and evening, and knew him for a well-to-do young gentleman who was anxious to clear his friend Lauriston of all suspicion, shook his head. He was a quiet, sagacious, middle-aged man who evidently thought deeply about whatever he had in hand.

"It's difficult to say, Mr. Purdie," he answered. "I've no doubt that when we get to the bottom of this case it'll turn out to be a very simple one—but the thing is to get to the bottom. The ways are complicated, sir—uncommonly so! At present we're in a maze—seeking the right path."

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"Do you think that this Parslett affair has anything to do with the Multenius affair?" asked Purdie.

"Yes—undoubtedly!" answered the detective. "There's no doubt whatever in my own mind that the man who poisoned Parslett is the man who caused the old pawnbroker's death—none! I figure it in this way. Parslett somehow, caught a glimpse of that man leaving Multenius's shop—by the side-door, no doubt—and knew him—knew him very well, mind you! When Parslett heard of what had happened in Multenius's back-parlour, he kept his knowledge to himself, and went and black-mailed the man. The man gave him that fifty pounds in gold to keep his tongue quiet—no doubt arranging to give him more, later on—and at the same time he cleverly poisoned him. That's my theory, Mr. Purdie."

"Then—the only question now is—who's the man?" suggested Purdie.

"That's it, sir—who's the man?" agreed the detective. "One thing's quite certain—if my theory's correct. He's a clever man—and an expert in the use of poisons."

Purdie walked on a minute or two in silence, thinking.

"It's no use beating about the bush," he said at last. "Do you suspect Mr. Levendale—after all you've collected in information—and after what I told you about what his butler saw—that bottle and phial?"

"I think that Levendale's in it," replied the detective, cautiously. "I'm sure he's in it—in some fashion. Our people are making no end of enquiries about him this morning, in various quarters—there's half-a-dozen of our best men at work in the City and the West End,

Mr. Purdie. He's got to be found! So, too, has this man Stephen Purvis—whoever he is. We must find him, too."

"Perhaps these letters that Melky Rubinstein speaks of may throw some light on that," said Purdie. "There must be some way of tracing him, somewhere."

They were at the pawnshop by that time, and all six trooped in at the side-entrance. Old Daniel Multenius, unconscious of all the fuss and bother which his death had caused, was to be quietly interred that afternoon, and Zillah and Melky were already in their mourning garments. But Zillah had lost none of her business habits and instincts, and while the faithful Mrs. Goldmark attended to the funeral guests in the upstairs regions, she herself was waiting in the back-parlour for these other visitors. On the table before her, evidently placed there for inspection, lay three objects to which she at once drew attention—one, an old-fashioned, double-breasted fancy waistcoat, evidently of considerable age, and much worn, the others, two letters written on foreign notepaper.

"It never occurred to me," said Zillah, plunging into business at once, "at least, until an hour or two ago, to examine the clothes my grandfather was wearing at the time of his death. As a matter of fact he'd been wearing the same clothes for months. I've been through all his pockets. There was nothing of importance—except these letters. I found those in a pocket in the inside of that waistcoat—there! Read them."

The men bent over the unfolded letters, and Ayscough read them aloud.

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“MACPHERSON’S HOTEL, CAPE TOWN,

“*September 17th, 1912.*

“DEAR SIR,—I have sent the little article about which I have already written you and Mr. L. fully, to your address by ordinary registered post. Better put it in your bank till I arrive—shall write you later about date of my arrival. Faithfully yours,

“STEPHEN PURVIS.”

“That,” remarked Ayscough, glancing at the rest, “clearly refers to whatever it was that Mr. Multenius took from his bank on the morning of his death. It also refers to Mr. Levendale—without doubt.”

He drew the other letter to him and read it out.

“CAPE TOWN,

“*October 10th, 1912.*

“DEAR SIR,—Just a line to say I leave here by s.s. *Golconda* in a day or two—this precedes me by today’s mail. I hope to be in England November 15th—due then, anyway—and shall call on you immediately on arrival. Better arrange to have Mr. S. L. to meet you and me at once. Faithfully,

“STEPHEN PURVIS.”

“November 15th?” remarked Ayscough. “Mr. Multenius died on November 19th. So—if Purvis did reach here on the 15th he’d probably been about this quarter before the 19th. We know he was at Mrs. Goldmark’s restaurant on the 18th, anyway! All right, Miss Wildrose—we’ll take these letters with us.”

Lauriston stopped behind when the rest of the men

went out—to exchange a few words alone with Zillah. When he went into the street, all had gone except Purdie, who was talking with Melky at the entrance to the side-alley.

“That’s the sure tip at present, mister,” Melky was saying. “Get that done—clear that up. Mr. Lauriston,” he went on, “you do what your friend says—we’re sorting things out piece by piece.”

Purdie took Lauriston’s arm and led him away.

“What Melky says is—go and find out what Mr. Killick can prove,” he said. “Best thing to do, too, Andie, for us. Now that these detectives are fairly on the hunt, and are in possession of a whole multitude of queer details and facts, we’ll just do our bit of business—which is to clear you entirely. There’s more reasons than one why we should do that, my man!”

“What’re you talking about, John?” demanded Lauriston. “You’ve some idea in that head of yours!”

“The idea that you and that girl are in love with each other!” said Purdie with a sly look.

“I’ll not deny that!” asserted Lauriston, with an ingenuous blush. “We are!”

“Well, you can’t ask any girl to marry you, man, while there’s the least bit of suspicion hanging over you that you’d a hand in her grandfather’s death!” remarked Purdie sapiently. “So we’ll just eat a bit of lunch together, and then get a taxi-cab and drive out to find this old gentleman that gave your mother the rings. Come on to the hotel.”

“You’re spending a fine lot of money over me, John!” exclaimed Lauriston.

“Put it down that I’m a selfish chap that’s got interested, and is following his own pleasure!” said Purdie. “Man alive!—I was never mixed up in a detective case before—it beats hunting for animals, this hunting for men!”

By a diligent search in directories and reference books early that morning, Purdie and Lauriston had managed to trace Mr. Edward Killick, who, having been at one time a well-known solicitor in the City, had followed the practice of successful men and retired to enjoy the fruit of his labours in a nice little retreat in the country. Mr. Killick had selected the delightful old-world village of Stanmore as the scene of his retirement, and there, in a picturesque old house, set in the midst of fine trees and carefully trimmed lawns, Purdie and Lauriston found him—a hale and hearty old gentleman, still on the right side of seventy, who rose from his easy chair in a well-stocked library to look in astonishment from the two cards which his servant had carried to him at the persons and faces of their presenters.

“God bless my soul!” he exclaimed. “Are you two young fellows the sons of old friends of mine at Peebles?”

“We are, sir,” answered Purdie. “This is Andrew Lauriston, and I am John Purdie. And we’re very glad to find that you remember something about our people, Mr. Killick.”

Mr. Killick again blessed himself, and after warmly shaking hands with his visitors, bade them sit down. He adjusted his spectacles, and looked both young men carefully over.

“I remember your people very well indeed!” he said.

"I used to do a bit of fishing in the Tweed and in Ed-leston Water with your father, Mr. Purdie—and I stopped some time with your father and mother, at their house, Mr. Lauriston. In fact, your mother was remarkably kind to me—she nursed me through an illness with which I was seized when I was in Peebles."

Lauriston and Purdie exchanged glances—by common consent Purdie became spokesman for the two.

"Mr. Killick," he said, "it's precisely about a matter arising out of that illness of yours that we came to see you! Let me explain something first—Andie. Lauriston here has been living in London for two years—he's a literary gift, and he hopes to make a name, and perhaps a fortune. I've succeeded to my father's business, and I'm only here in London on a visit. And it's well I came, for Andie wanted a friend. Now, Mr. Killick, before I go further—have you read in the newspapers about what's called the Praed Street Mystery?"

The old gentleman shook his head.

"My dear young sir!" he answered, waving his hand towards his books. "I'm not a great newspaper reader—except for a bit of politics. I never read about mysteries—I've wrapped myself up in antiquarian pursuits since I retired. No!—I haven't read about the Praed Street Mystery—nor even heard of it! I hope neither of you are mixed up in it?"

"Considerably!" answered Purdie. "In more ways than one. And you can be of great help. Mr. Killick—when you left Peebles after your illness, you sent Mrs. Lauriston a present of two valuable rings. Do you remember?"

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“Perfectly—of course!” replied the old gentleman.
“To be sure!”

“Can you remember, too, from whom you bought those rings?” enquired Purdie eagerly.

“Yes!—as if it were yesterday!” said Mr. Killick.
“I bought them from a City jeweller whom I knew very well at that time—a man named Daniel Molteno!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MR. KILLICK'S OPINION

The old solicitor's trained eye and quick intelligence saw at once that this announcement immediately conveyed some significant meaning to his two young visitors. Purdie and Lauriston, in fact, had immediately been struck by the similarity of the names Molteno and Mullenius, and they exchanged another look which their host detected and knew to convey a meaning. He leaned forward in his chair.

"Now, that strikes you—both!" he said. "What's all this about? Better give me your confidence."

"That's precisely what we came here to do, sir," responded Purdie, with alacrity. "And with your permission I'll tell you the whole story. It's a long one, and a complicated one, Mr. Killick!—but I daresay you've heard many intricate stories in the course of your legal experience, and you'll no doubt be able to see points in this that we haven't seen. Well, it's this way—and I'll begin at the beginning."

The old gentleman sat in an attitude of patient and watchful attention while Purdie, occasionally prompted and supplemented by Lauriston, told the whole story of the Praed Street affair, from Lauriston's first visit to the pawnshop up to the events of that morning. Once or twice he asked a question; one or twice he begged the

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narrator to pause while he considered a point: in the end he drew out his watch—after which he glanced out of his window.

“Do I gather that the taxi-cab which I see outside there is being kept by you two young men?” he asked.

“It is,” answered Purdie. “It’s important that we should lose no time in getting back to town, Mr. Killick.”

Just so!” agreed Mr. Killick, moving towards his library door. “But I’m going with you—as soon as I’ve got myself into an overcoat. Now!” he added, a few minutes later, when all three went out to the cab. “Tell the man to drive us straight to that police-station you’ve been visiting of late—and till we get there, just let me think quietly—I can probably say more about this case than I’m yet aware of. But—if it will give you any relief, I can tell you this at once—I have a good deal to tell. Strange!—strange indeed how things come round, and what a small world this is, after all!”

With this cryptic utterance Mr. Killick sank into a corner of the cab, where he remained, evidently lost in thought, until, nearly an hour later, they pulled up at the door of the police-station. Within five minutes they were closeted with the chief men there—amongst whom were Ayscough and the detective from New Scotland Yard.

“You know me—or of me—some of you?” observed the old solicitor, as he laid a card on the desk by which he had been given a chair. “I was very well known in the City police-courts, you know, until I retired three years ago. Now, these young gentlemen have just told me all the facts of this very strange case, and I think I

can throw some light on it—on part of it, anyway. First of all, let me see those two rings about which there has been so much enquiry.”

Ayscough produced the rings from a locked drawer; the rest of those present looked on curiously as they were examined and handled by Mr. Killick. It was immediately evident that he had no doubt about his recognition and identification of them—after a moment's inspection of each he pushed them back towards the detective.

“Certainly!” he said with a confidence that carried conviction. “Those are the rings which I gave to Mrs. Lauriston, this young man's mother. I knew them at once. If it's necessary, I can show you the receipt which I got with them from the seller. The particulars are specified in that receipt—and I know that I still have it. Does my testimony satisfy you?”

The chief official present glanced at the man from New Scotland Yard, and receiving a nod from him, smiled at the old solicitor.

“I think we can rely on your evidence, Mr. Killick,” he said. “We had to make certain, you know. But these marks— isn't that a curious coincidence, now, when you come to think of it?”

“Not a bit of it!” replied Mr. Killick. “And I'll tell you why—that's precisely what I've come all the way from my own comfortable fireside at Stanmore to do! There's no coincidence at all. I've heard the whole story of this Praed Street affair now from these two lads. And I've no more doubt than I have that I see you, that the old pawnbroker whom you knew hereabouts as Daniel

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Multenius was the same man Daniel Molteno—from whom I bought those rings, years ago! Not the slightest doubt!”

None of those present made any remark on this surprising announcement, and Mr. Killick went on.

“I was, as some of you may know, in practice in the City—in Moorgate Street, as a matter of fact,” he said. “Daniel Molteno was a jeweller in Houndsditch. I occasionally acted for him—professionally. And occasionally when I wanted anything in the way of jewellery, I went to his shop. He was then a man of about fifty, a tall, characteristically Hebraic sort of man, already patriarchal in appearance, though he hadn’t a grey hair in his big black beard. He was an interesting man, profoundly learned in the history of precious stones. I remember buying those rings from him very well indeed—I remember, too, what I gave him for them—seventy-five pounds for the two. Those private marks inside them are, of course, his—and so they’re just the same as his private marks inside those other rings in the tray. But that’s not what I came here to tell you—that’s merely preliminary.”

“Deeply interesting, anyway, sir,” observed Ayscough. “And, maybe, very valuable.”

“Not half so valuable as what I’m going to tell you,” replied Mr. Killick, with a dry chuckle. “Now, as I understand it, from young Mr. Purdie’s account, you’re all greatly excited at present over the undoubted connection with this Praed Street mystery of one Mr. Spencer Levendale, who is, I believe, a very rich man, a resident in one of the best parts of this district, and a Member of

Parliament. It would appear from all you've discovered, amongst you, up to now, that Spencer Levendale has been privately mixed up with old Daniel Multenius in some business which seems to be connected with South Africa. Now, attend to what I say:—About the time that I knew Daniel Molteno in Houndsditch, Daniel Molteno had a partner—a junior partner, whose name, however, didn't appear over the shop. He was a much younger man than Daniel—in fact, he was quite a young man—I should say he was then about twenty-three or four—not more. He was of medium height, dark, typically Jewish, large dark eyes, olive skin, good-looking, smart, full of go. And his name—the name I knew him by—was Sam Levin.” The other men in the room glanced at each other—and one of them softly murmured what all was thinking.

“The same initials!”

“Just so!” agreed Mr. Killick. “That's what struck me—Sam Levin: Spencer Levendale. Very well!—I continue. One day I went to Daniel Molteno's shop to get something repaired, and it struck me that I hadn't seen Sam Levin the last two or three times I had been in. ‘Where's your partner?’ I asked of Daniel Molteno. ‘I haven't seen him lately.’ ‘Partner no longer, Mr. Killick,’ said he. ‘We've dissolved. He's gone to South Africa.’ ‘What to do there?’ I asked. ‘Oh,’ answered Daniel Molteno, ‘he's touched with this fever to get at close quarters with the diamond fields! He's gone out there to make a fortune, and come back a millionaire.’ ‘Well!’ I said. ‘He's a likely candidate.’ ‘Oh, yes!’ said Daniel. ‘He'll do well.’ No more was said—and, as far as I can remember, I never saw Daniel Molteno again. It

was some time before I had occasion to go that way—when I did, I was surprised to see a new name over the shop. I went in and asked where its former proprietor was. The new shopkeeper told me that Mr. Molteno had sold his business to him. And he didn't know where Mr. Molteno had gone, or whether he'd retired from business altogether; he knew nothing—and evidently didn't care, either, so—that part of my memories comes to an end!"

"Mr. Spencer Levendale is a man of just under fifty," remarked Ayscough, after a thoughtful pause, "and I should say that twenty-five years ago, he'd be just such a man as Mr. Killick has described."

"You can take it from me—considering all that I've been told this afternoon—" said the old solicitor, "that Spencer Levendale is Sam Levin—come back from South Africa, a millionaire. I'm convinced of it! And now then, gentlemen, what does all this mean? There's no doubt that old Multenius and Levendale were secretly mixed up. What in? What's the extraordinary mystery about that book—left in Multenius's back parlour and advertised for immediately by Levendale as if it were simply invaluable? Why has Levendale utterly disappeared? And who is this man Purvis—and what's he to do with it? You've got the hardest nuts to crack—a whole basketful of 'em!—that ever I heard of. And I've had some little experience of crime!"

"I've had some information on Levendale and Purvis this very afternoon," said Ayscough. He turned to the other officials. "I hadn't a chance of telling you of it before," he continued. "I was at Levendale's house at

three o'clock, making some further enquiries. I got two pieces of news. To start with—that bottle out of which Levendale filled a small phial, which he put in his waistcoat pocket when he went out for the last time—you remember, Mr. Purdie, that his butler told you of that incident—well, that bottle contains chloroform—I took a chemist there to examine it and some other things. That's item one. The other's a bit of information volunteered by Levendale's chauffeur. The morning after Mr. Multenius's death, and after you, Mr. Lauriston, Mr. Rubinstein, and myself called on Levendale, Levendale went off to the City in his car. He ordered the chauffeur to go through Hyde Park, by the Victoria Gate, and to stop by the Powder Magazine. At the Powder Magazine he got out of the car and walked down towards the bridge on the Serpentine. The chauffeur had him in view all the way, and saw him join a tall man, clean-shaven, much browned, who was evidently waiting for him. They remained in conversation, at the entrance to the bridge, some five minutes or so—then the stranger went across the bridge in the direction of Kensington, and Levendale returned to his car. Now, in my opinion, that strange man was this Purvis we've heard of. And that seems to have been the last time any one we've come across saw him. That night, after his visit to his house, and his taking the phial of chloroform away with him, Levendale utterly disappeared, too—and yet sent a wire to his butler, from close by, next morning, saying he would be away for a few days! Why didn't he call with that message himself?"

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Mr. Killick, who had listened to Ayscough with close attention, laughed, and turned to the officials with a sharp look.

“Shall I give you people a bit of my opinion after hearing all this?” he said. “Very well, then—Levendale never did send that wire! It was sent in Levendale’s name—to keep things quiet. I believe that Levendale’s been trapped—and Purvis with him!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE ORANGE-YELLOW DIAMOND

His various listeners had heard all that the old solicitor had said, with evident interest and attention—now, one of them voiced what all the rest was thinking.

“What makes you think that, Mr. Killick?” asked the man from New Scotland Yard. “Why should Levendale and Purvis have been trapped?”

Mr. Killick—who was obviously enjoying this return to the arena in which, as some of those present well knew, he had once played a distinguished part, as a solicitor with an extensive police-court practice—twisted round on his questioner with a sly, knowing glance.

“You’re a man of experience!” he answered. “Now come!—hasn’t it struck you that something went before the death of old Daniel Multenius—whether that death arose from premeditated murder, or from sudden assault? Eh?—hasn’t it?”

“What, then?” asked the detective dubiously. “For I can’t say that it has—definitely. What do you conjecture did go before that?”

Mr. Killick thumped his stout stick on the floor.

“Robbery!” he exclaimed, triumphantly. “Robbery! The old man was robbed of something! Probably—and there’s nothing in these cases like considering possibilities—he caught the thief in the act of robbing him, and

lost his life in defending his property. Now, supposing Levendale and Purvis were interested—financially—in that property, and set their wits to work to recover it, and in their efforts got into the hands of—shall we suppose a gang?—and got trapped? Or,” concluded Mr. Killick with great emphasis and meaning, “for anything we know—murdered? What about that theory?”

“Possible!” muttered Ayscough. “Quite possible!”

“Consider this,” continued the old solicitor. “Levendale is a well-known man—a Member of Parliament—a familiar figure in the City, where he’s director of more than one company—the sort of man whom, in ordinary circumstances, you’d be able to trace in a few hours. Now, you tell me that half-a-dozen of your best men have been trying to track Levendale for two days and nights, and can’t get a trace of him! What’s the inference? A well-known man can’t disappear in that way unless for some very grave reason! For anything we know, Levendale—and Purvis with him—may be safely trapped within half-a-mile of Praed Street—or, as I say, they may have been quietly murdered. Of one thing I’m dead certain, anyway—if you want to get at the bottom of this affair, you’ve got to find those two men!”

“It would make a big difference if we had any idea of what it was that Daniel Multenius had in that packet which he fetched from his bank on the day of the murder,” remarked Ayscough. “If there’s been robbery, that may have been the thief’s object.”

“That pre-supposes that the thief knew what was in the packet,” said Purdie. “Who is there that could

know? We may take it that Levendale and Purvis knew—but who else would?"

"Aye!—and how are we to find that out?" asked the New Scotland Yard man. "If I only knew that much—"

But even at that moment—and not from any coincidence, but from the law of probability to which Mr. Killick had appealed—information on that very point was close at hand. A constable tapped at the door, and entering, whispered a few words to the chief official, who having whispered back, turned to the rest as the man went out of the room.

"Here's something likely!" he said. "There's a Mr. John Purvis, from Devonshire, outside. Says he's the brother of the Stephen Purvis who's name's been in the papers as having mysteriously disappeared, and wants to tell the police something. He's coming in."

The men in the room turned with undisguised interest as the door opened again, and a big, fresh-coloured countryman, well wrapped up in a stout travelling coat, stepped into the room and took a sharp glance at its occupants. He was evidently a well-to-do farmer, this and quite at his ease—but there was a certain natural anxiety in his manner as he turned to the official, who sat at the desk in the centre of the group.

"You're aware of my business, sir?" he asked quietly.

"I understand you're the brother of the Stephen Purvis we're wanting to find in connection with this Praed Street mystery," answered the official. "You've read of that in the newspaper, no doubt, Mr. Purvis? Take a seat—you want to tell us something? As a matter of fact, we're all discussing the affair!"

The caller took the chair which Ayscough drew forward and sat down, throwing open his heavy overcoat, and revealing a whipcord riding-suit of light fawn beneath it.

"You'll see I came here in a hurry, gentlemen," he said, with a smile. "I'd no thoughts of coming to London when I left my farm this morning, or I'd have put London clothes on! The fact is—I farm at a very out-of-the-way place between Moretonhampstead and Exeter, and I never see the daily papers except when I drive into Exeter twice a week. Now when I got in there this morning, I saw one or two London papers—last night's they were—and read about this affair. And I read enough to know that I'd best get here as quick as possible!—so I left all my business there and then, and caught the very next express to Paddington. And here I am! And now—have you heard anything of my brother Stephen more than what's in the papers? I've seen today's, on the way up."

"Nothing!" answered the chief official. "Nothing at all! We've purposely kept the newspapers informed, and what there is in the morning's papers is the very latest. So—can you tell us anything?"

"I can tell you all I know myself," replied John Purvis, with a solemn shake of his head. "And I should say it's a good deal to do with Stephen's disappearance—in which, of course, there's some foul play! My opinion, gentlemen, is that my brother's been murdered! That's about it!"

No one made any remark—but Mr. Killick uttered a

little murmur of comprehension, and nodded his head two or three times.

"Murdered, poor fellow, in my opinion," continued John Purvis. "And I'll tell you why I think so. About November 8th or 9th—I can't be sure to a day—I got a telegram from Stephen, sent off from Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands, saying he'd be at Plymouth on the 15th, and asking me to meet him there. So I went to Plymouth on the morning of the 15th. His boat, the *Golconda*, came in at night, and we went to an hotel together and stopped the night there. We hadn't met for some years, and of course he'd a great deal to tell—but he'd one thing in particular—he'd struck such a piece of luck as he'd never had in his life before!—and he hadn't been one of the unlucky ones, either!"

"What was this particular piece of luck?" asked Mr. Killick.

John Purvis looked round as if to make sure of general attention.

"He'd come into possession, through a fortunate bit of trading, up country in South Africa, of one of the finest diamonds ever discovered!" he answered. "I know nothing about such things, but he said it was an orange-yellow diamond that would weigh at least a hundred and twenty carats when cut, and was worth, as far as he could reckon, some eighty to ninety thousand pounds. Anyway, that was what he'd calculated he was going to get for it here in London—and what he wanted to see me about, in addition to telling me of his luck, was that he wanted to buy a real nice bit of property in

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Devonshire, and settle down in the old country. But—I'm afraid his luck's turned to a poor end! Gentlemen!—I'm certain my brother's been murdered for that diamond!"

The police officials, as with one consent, glanced at Mr. Killick, and by their looks seemed to invite his assistance. The old gentleman nodded and turned to the caller.

"Now, Mr. Purvis," he said, "just let me ask you a few questions. Did your brother tell you that this diamond was his own, sole property?"

"He did, sir!" answered the farmer. "He said it was all his own."

"Did he tell you where it was—what he had done with it?"

"Yes! He said that for some years he'd traded in small parcels of such things with two men here in London—Multenius and Levendale—he knew both of them. He'd sent the diamond on in advance to Multenius, by ordinary registered post, rather than run the risk of carrying it himself."

"I gather from that last remark that your brother had let some other person or persons know that he possessed this stone?" said Mr. Killick. "Did he mention that? It's of importance."

"He mentioned no names—but he did say that one or two knew of his luck, and he'd an idea that he'd been watched in Cape Town, and followed on the *Golconda*," replied John Purvis. "He laughed about that, and said he wasn't such a fool as to carry a thing like that on him."

"Did he say if he knew for a fact that the diamond was delivered to Multenius?" asked Mr. Killick.

"Yes, he did. He found a telegram from Multenius at Las Palmas, acknowledging the receipt. He mentioned to me that Multenius would put the diamond in his bank, till he got to London himself."

Mr. Killick glanced at the detective—the detectives nodded.

"Very good," continued Mr. Killick. "Now then—you'd doubtless talk a good deal about this matter—did your brother tell you what was to be done with the diamond? Had he a purchaser in view?"

"Yes, he said something about that," replied John Purvis. "He said that Multenius and Levendale would make—or were making—what he called a syndicate to buy it from him. They'd have it cut—over in Amsterdam, I think it was. He reckoned he'd get quite eighty thousand from the syndicate."

"He didn't mention any other names than those of Multenius and Levendale?"

"No—none!"

"Now, one more question. Where did your brother leave you—at Plymouth?"

"First thing next morning," said John Purvis. "We travelled together as far as Exeter. He came on to Paddington—I went home to my farm. And I've never heard of him since—till I read all this in the papers."

Mr. Killick got up and began to button his overcoat. He turned to the police.

"Now you know what we wanted to know!" he said. "That diamond is at the bottom of everything! Daniel

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Multenius was throttled for that diamond—Parslett's death arose out of that diamond—everything's arisen from that diamond! And, now that you police folks know all this—you know what to do. You want the man, or men, who were in Daniel Multenius's shop about five o'clock on that particular day, and who carried off that diamond. Mr. Purvis!—are you staying in town?"

The farmer shook his head—but not in the negative.

"I'm not going out of London, till I know what's become of my brother!" he said.

"Then come with me," said Mr. Killick. He said a word or two to the police, and then, beckoning Lauriston and Purdie to follow with Purvis, led the way out into the street. There he drew Purdie towards him. "Get a taxi-cab," he whispered, "and we'll all go to see that American man you've told me of—Guyler. And when we've seen him, you can take me to see Daniel Multenius's granddaughter."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE DEAD MAN'S PROPERTY

Old Daniel Multenius had been quietly laid to rest that afternoon, and at the very moment in which Mr. Killick and his companions were driving away from the police-station to seek Stuyvesant Guyler at his hotel, Mr. Penniket was closeted with Zillah and her cousin Melky Rubinstein in the back-parlour of the shop in Praed Street—behind closed and locked doors which they had no intention of opening to anybody. Now that the old man was dead and buried, it was necessary to know how things stood with respect to his will and his property, and, as Mr. Penniket had remarked as they drove back from the cemetery, there was no reason why they should not go into matters there and then. Zillah and Melky were the only relations—and the only people concerned, said Mr. Penniket. Five minutes would put them in possession of the really pertinent facts as regards the provisions of the will—but there would be details to go into. And now they were all three sitting round the table, and Mr. Penniket had drawn two papers from his inner pocket—and Zillah regarding him almost listlessly, and Melky with one of his quietly solemn expression. Each had a pretty good idea of what was coming and each regarded the present occasion as no more than a formality.

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"This is the will," said Mr. Penniket, selecting and unfolding one of the documents. "It was made about a year ago—by me. That is, I drafted it. It's a short, a very short and practical will, drafted from precise instructions given me by my late client, your grandfather. I may as well tell you in a few words what it amounts to. Everything that he left is to be sold—this business as a going concern; all his shares; all his house property. The whole estate is to be realized by the executors—your two selves. And when that's done, you're to divide the lot—equally. One half is yours, Miss Wildrose; Mr. Rubinstein, the other half is yours. And," concluded Mr. Penniket, rubbing his hands, "you'll find you're very fortunate—not to say wealthy—young people, and I congratulate you on your good fortune! Now, perhaps, you'd like to read the will?"

Mr. Penniket laid the will on the table before the two cousins, and they bent forward and read its legal phraseology. Zillah was the first to look up and to speak.

"I never knew my grandfather had any house property," she said. "Did you, Melky?"

"S'elp me, Zillah, if I ever knew what he had in that way!" answered Melky. "He had his secrets and he could be close. No—I never knew of his having anything but his business. But then, I might have known that he'd invest his profits in some way or other."

The solicitor unfolded the other document.

"Here's a schedule, prepared by Mr. Multenius himself, and handed by him to me not many weeks ago, of his property outside this business," he remarked. "I'll go through the items. Shares in the Great Western Rail-

way. Shares in the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway. Government Stock. Certain American Railway Stock. It's all particularized—and all gilt-edged security. Now then, about his house property. There's a block of flats at Hampstead. There are six houses at Highgate. There are three villas in the Finchley Road. The rents of all these have been collected by Messrs. Holder and Keeper, estate agents, and evidently paid by them direct to your esteemed relative's account at his bank. And then—to wind up—there is a small villa in Maida Vale, which he let furnished—you never heard of that?"

"Never!" exclaimed Zillah, while Melky shook his head.

"There's a special note about that at the end of this schedule," said Mr. Penniket. "In his own hand—like all the rest. This is what he says. 'N. B. Molteno Lodge, Maida Vale—all the furniture, pictures, belongings in this are mine—I have let it as a furnished residence at £12 a month, all clear, for some years past. Let at present, on same terms, rent paid quarterly, in advance, to two Chinese gentlemen, Mr. Chang Li and Mr. Chen Li—good tenants.'"

Zillah uttered another sharp exclamation and sprang to her feet. She walked across to an old-fashioned stand-up desk which stood in a corner of the parlour, drew a bunch of keys from her pocket, and raised the lid.

"That explains something!" she said. "I looked into this desk the other day—grandfather used to throw letters and papers in there sometimes, during the day, and then put them away at night. Here's a cheque here that

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puzzled me—I don't know anything about it. But—it'll be a quarter's rent for that house. Look at the signatures!"

She laid a cheque before Melky and Mr. Penniket and stood by while they looked at it. There was nothing remarkable about the cheque—made out to Mr. Daniel Multenius or order for £36—except the two odd looking names at its foot—*Chang Li: Chen Li*. Otherwise, it was just like all other cheques—and it was on a local bank, in Edgware Road, and duly crossed. But Melky instantly observed the date, and put one of his long fingers to it.

"November 18th," he remarked. "The day he died. Did you notice that, Zillah?"

"Yes," answered Zillah. "It must have come in by post and he's thrown it, as he often did throw things, into that desk. Well—that's explained! That'll be the quarter's rent, then, for this furnished house, Mr. Penniket?"

"Evidently!" agreed the solicitor. "Of course, there's no need to give notice to these two foreigners—yet. It'll take a little time to settle the estate, and you can let them stay on awhile. I know who they are—your grandfather mentioned them—two medical students, of University College. They're all right. Well, now, that completes the schedule. As regards administering the estate—"

A sudden gentle but firm knock at the side-door brought Zillah to her feet again.

"I know that knock," she remarked. "It's Ayscough, the detective. I suppose he may come in, now?"

A moment later Ayscough, looking very grave and full

of news, had joined the circle round the table. He shook his head as he glanced at Mr. Penniket.

"I came on here to give you a bit of information," he said. "There's been an important development this afternoon. You know the name of this Stephen Purvis that's been mentioned as having been about here? Well, this afternoon his brother turned up from Devonshire. He wanted to see us—to tell us something. He thinks Stephen's been murdered!"

"On what grounds?" asked the solicitor.

"It turns out Stephen had sent Mr. Multenius a rare fine diamond—uncut—from South Africa," answered Ayscough. "Worth every penny of eighty thousand pounds!"

He was closely watching Zillah and Melky as he gave this piece of news, and he was quick to see their utter astonishment. Zillah turned to the solicitor; Melky slapped the table.

"That's been what the old man fetched from his bank that day!" he exclaimed. "S'elp me if I ain't beginning to see light! Robbery—before murder!"

"That's about it," agreed Ayscough. "But I'll tell you all that's come out."

He went on to narrate the events of the afternoon, from the arrival of Mr. Killick and his companions at the police-station to the coming of John Purvis, and his three listeners drank in every word with rising interest. Mr. Penniket became graver and graver.

"Where's Mr. Killick now—and the rest of them?" he asked in the end.

"Gone to find that American chap—Guyler," answered

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Ayscough. "They did think he might be likely—having experience of these South African matters—to know something how Stephen Purvis may have been followed. You see—you're bound to have some theory! It looks as if Stephen Purvis had been tracked—for the sake of that diamond. The thieves probably tracked it to this shop—most likely attacked Mr. Multenius for it. They'd most likely been in here just before young Lauriston came in."

"But where does Stephen Purvis come in—then?" asked Mr. Penniket.

"Can't say yet—," replied Ayscough, doubtfully. "But—it may be that he—and Levendale—got an idea who the thieves were, and went off after them, and have got—well, trapped, or, as John Purvis suggests, murdered. It's getting a nicer tangle than ever!"

"What's going to be done?" enquired the solicitor.

"Why!" said Ayscough. "At present, there's little more to be done than what is being done! There's no end of publicity in the newspapers about both Levendale and Purvis. Every newspaper reporter in London's on the stretch for a thread of news of 'em! And we're getting posters and bills out, all over, advertising for them—those bills'll be outside every police-station in London—and over a good part of England—by tomorrow noon. And, of course, we're all at work. But you see, we haven't so far, the slightest clue as to the thieves! For there's no doubt, now, that it was theft first, and the rest afterwards."

Mr. Penniket rose and gathered his papers together.

"I suppose," he remarked, "that neither of you ever

heard of this diamond, nor of Mr. Multenius having charge of it? No—just so. An atmosphere of secrecy all over the transaction. Well—all I can say, Ayscough, is this—you find Levendale. He's the man who knows."

When the solicitor had gone, Ayscough turned to Zillah.

"You never saw anything of any small box, packet, or anything of that sort, lying about after your grandfather's death?" he asked. "I'm thinking of what that diamond had been enclosed in, when he brought it from the bank. My notion is that he was examining that diamond when he was attacked, and in that case the box he'd taken it from would be lying about, or thrown aside."

"You were in here yourself, before me," said Zillah.

"Quite so—but I never noticed anything," remarked Ayscough.

"Neither have I," replied Zillah. "And don't you think that whoever seized that diamond would have the sense to snatch up anything connected with it! I believe in what Mr. Penniket said just now—you find Levendale. If there's a man living who knows who killed my grandfather, Levendale's that man. You get him."

Mrs. Goldmark came in just then, to resume her task of keeping Zillah company, and the detective left. Melky snatched up his overcoat and followed him out, and in the side-passage laid a hand on his arm.

"Look here, Mr. Ayscough!" he whispered confidentially. "I want you! There's something turned up in there, just now, that I ain't said a word about to either Penniket or my cousin—but I will to you. Do you know what, Mr. Ayscough—listen here;"—and he went on to

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tell the detective the story of the furnished house in Maida Vale, its Chinese occupants, and their cheque. "Dated that very day the old man was scragged!" exclaimed Melky. "Now, Mr. Ayscough, supposing that one o' those Chinks called here with that cheque that afternoon when Zillah was out, and found the old man alone, and that diamond in his hand—eh?"

Ayscough started and gave a low, sharp whistle.

"Whew!" he said. "By George, that's an idea! Where's this house, do you say? Molteno Lodge, Maida Vale? I know it—small detached house in a garden. I say!—let's go and take a look round there!"

"It's what I was going to propose—and at once," responded Melky. "Come on—but on the way, we'll pay a bit of a call. I want to ask a question of Dr. Mirandolst.."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE RAT

Ayscough and Melky kept silence, until they had exchanged the busy streets for the quieter by-roads which lie behind the Paddington Canal—then, as they turned up Portsdown Road, the detective tapped his companion's arm?"

"What do you know about these two Chinese chaps that have this furnished house of yours?" he asked. "Much?—or little?"

"We don't know nothing at all, Mr. Ayscough—me and my cousin Zillah," replied Melky. "Never heard of 'em! Never knew they were there! Never knew the old man had furnished house to let in Maida Vale! He was close, the old man was, about some things. That was one of 'em. However, Mr. Penniket, he knew of this—but only recently. He says they're all right—medical students at one of the hospitals—yes, University College. That's in Gower Street, ain't it? The old man—he put in a note about there here Molteno Lodge that these Chinks were good tenants. I know what he'd mean by that!—paid their rent regular, in advance."

"Oh, I know they've always plenty of money, these chaps!" observed Ayscough. "I've been wondering if I'd ever seen these two. But Lor' bless you!—there's

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such a lot o' foreigners in this quarter, especially Japanese and Siamese—law students and medical students and such like—that you'd never notice a couple of Easterns particularly—and I've no doubt they wear English clothes. Now, what do you want to see this doctor for?" he asked as they halted by Dr. Mirandolet's door. "Anything to do with the matter in hand?"

"You'll see in a minute," replied Melky as he rang the bell. "Just a notion that occurred to me. And it has got to do with it."

Dr. Mirandolet was in, and received his visitors in a room which was half-surgery and half-laboratory, and filled to the last corner with the evidences and implements of his profession. He was wearing a white linen operating jacket, and his dark face and black hair looked all the darker and blacker because of it. Melky gazed at him with some awe as he dropped into the chair which Mirandolet indicated and found the doctor's piercing eyes on him.

"Just a question or two, mister!" he said, apologetically. "Me and Mr. Ayseough there is doing a bit of looking into this mystery about Mr. Multenius, and knowing as you was a big man in your way, it struck me you'd tell me something. I was at that inquest on Parslett, you know, mister."

Mirandolet nodded and waited, and Melky gained courage.

"Mister!" he said, suddenly bending forward and tapping the doctor's knee in a confidential fashion. "I hear you say at that inquest as how you'd lived in the East?"

"Yes!" replied Mirandolet. "Many years. India—Burmah—China!"

"You know these Easterns, mister, and their little way?" suggested Melky. "Now, would it be too much—I don't want to get no professional information, you know, if it ain't etiquette!—but would it be too much to ask you if them folks is pretty good hands at poisoning?"

Mirandolet laughed, showing a set of very white teeth, and glared at Ayscough with a suggestion of invitation to join in his amusement. He clapped Melky on the shoulder as if he had said something diverting.

"Good hands, my young friend?" he exclaimed. "The very best in the world! Past masters! Adepts. Poison you while they look at you!"

"Bit cunning and artful about it, mister?" suggested Melky.

"Beyond your conception, my friend," replied Mirandolet. "Unless I very much mistake your physiognomy, you yourself come of an ancient race which is not without cunning and artifice—but in such matters as you refer to, you are children, compared to your Far East folk."

"Just so, mister—I believe you!" said Melky, solemnly. "And—which of 'em, now, do you consider the cleverest of the lot—them as you say you've lived amongst, now? You mentioned three lots of 'em, you know—Indians, Burmese, Chinese. Which would you consider the artfullest of them three—if it came to a bit of real underhand work, now?"

"For the sort of thing you're thinking of, my friend," answered Mirandolet, "you can't beat a Chinaman. Does that satisfy you?"

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Melky rose and glanced at the detective before turning to the doctor.

"Mister," he said, "that's precisely what I should ha' said myself. Only—I wanted to know what a big man like you thought. Now, I know! Much obliged to you, mister. If there's ever anything I can do for you, doctor—if you want a bit of real good stuff—jewellery, you know—at dead cost price—"

Mirandolet laughed and clapping Melky's shoulder again, looked at Ayscough.

"What's our young friend after?" he asked, good-humouredly. "What's his game?"

"Hanged if I know, doctor!" said Ayscough, shaking his head. "He's got some notion in his head. Are you satisfied, Mr. Rubinstein?"

Melky was making for the door.

"Ain't I just said so?" he answered. "You come along of me, Mr. Ayscough, and let's be getting about our business. Now, look here!" he said, taking the detective's arm when they had left the house. "We're going to take a look at them Chinks. I've got it into my head that they've something to do with this affair—and I'm going to see 'em, and to ask 'em a question or two. And—you're coming with me!"

"I say, you know!" remarked Ayscough. "They're respectable gentlemen—even if they are foreigners. Better be careful—we don't know anything against 'em."

"Never you fear!" said Melky. "I'll beat 'em all right. Ain't I got a good excuse, Mr. Ayscough? Just to ask a civil question. Begging their pardons for in-

trusion, but since the lamented death of Mr. Daniel Multenius, me and Miss Zillah Wildrose has come into his bit of property, and does the two gentlemen desire to continue their tenancy, and is there anything we can do to make 'em comfortable—see? Oh, I'll talk to 'em all right!"

"What're you getting at, all the same?" asked the detective. "Give it a title!"

Melky squeezed his companion's arm.

"I want to see 'em," he whispered. "That's one thing. And I want to find out how that last cheque of theirs got into our back-parlour! Was it sent by post—or was it delivered by hand? And if by hand—who delivered it?"

"You're a cute 'un, you are!" observed Ayscough. "You'd better join us."

"Thank you, Mr. Ayscough, but events has happened which'll keep me busy at something else," said Melky, cheerfully. "Do you know that my good old relative has divided everything between me and my cousin?—I'm a rich man, now, Mr. Ayscough. S'elp me!—I don't know how rich I am. It'll take a bit o'reckoning."

"Good luck to you!" exclaimed the detective heartily. "Glad to hear it! Then I reckon you and your cousin'll be making a match of it—keeping the money in the family, what?"

Melky laid his finger on the side of his nose.

"Then you think wrong!" he said. "There'll be marriages before long—for both of us—but it'll not be as you suggest! There's Molteno Lodge, across the road there

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—s'elp me, I've often seen that bit of a retreat from the top of a 'bus, but I never knew it belonged to the poor old man!"

They had now come to the lower part of Maida Vale, where many detached houses stand in walled-in gardens, isolated and detached from each other—Melky pointed to one of the smaller ones—a stucco villa, whose white walls shone in the November moonlight. Its garden, surrounded by high walls, was somewhat larger than those of the neighbouring houses, and was filled with elms rising to a considerable height and with tall bushes growing beneath them.

"Nice, truly rural sort of spot," said Melky, as they crossed the road and approached the gate in the wall. "And—once inside—uncommon private, no doubt! What do you say, Mr. Ayscough?"

The detective was examining the gate. It was a curious sort of gate, set between two stout pillars, and fashioned of wrought ironwork, the meshes of which were closely intertwined. Ayscough peered through the upper part and saw a trim lawn, a bit of statuary, a garden seat, and all the rest of the appurtenances common to a London garden whose owners wish to remind themselves of rusticity—also, he saw no signs of life in the house at the end of the garden.

"There's no light in this house," he remarked, trying the gate. "Looks to me as if everybody was out. Are you going to ring?"

Melky pointed along the front of the wall.

"There's a sort of alley going up there, between this

house and the next," he said. "Come round—sure to be a tradesman's entrance—a side-door—up there."

"Plenty of spikes and glass-bottle stuff on those walls, anyhow!" remarked Ayscough, as they went round a narrow alley to the rear of the villa. "Your grandfather evidently didn't intend anybody to get into these premises very easily, Mr. Rubinstein. Six-foot walls and what you might call regular fortifications on top of 'em! What are you going to do, now?"

Melky had entered a recess in the side-wall and was examining a stout door on which, plainly seen in the moonlight, were the words *Tradesman's Entrance*. He turned the handle—and uttered an exclamation.

"Open!" he said. "Come on, Mr. Ayscough—we're a-going in! If there is anybody at home, all right—if there ain't, well, still all right. I'm going to have a look round."

The detective followed Melky into a paved yard at the back of the villa. All was very still there—and the windows were dark.

"No lights, back or front," remarked Ayscough. "Can't be anybody in. And I say—if either of those Chinese gents was to let himself in with his key at the front gate and find us prowling about, it wouldn't look very well, would it, now? Why not call again—in broad daylight?"

"Shucks!" said Melky. "Ain't I one o' the landlords of this desirable bit o' property? And didn't we find that door open? Come round to the front."

He set off along a gravelled path which ran round the

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side of the house, and ascended the steps to the porticoed front door. And there he rang the bell—and he and his companion heard its loud ringing inside the house. But no answer came—and the whole place seemed darker and stiller than before.

“Of course there’s nobody in!” muttered Ayscough. “Come on—let’s get out of it.”

Melky made no answer. He walked down the steps, and across the lawn beneath the iron-work gate in the street wall. A thick shrubbery of holly and laurel bushes stood on his right—and as he passed it something darted out—something alive and alert and sinuous—and went scudding away across the lawn.

“Good Lord!” said Ayscough. “A rat! And as big as a rabbit!”

Melky paused, looked after the rat, and then at the place from which it had emerged. And suddenly he stepped towards the shrubbery and drew aside the thick cluster of laurel branches. Just as suddenly he started back on the detective, and his face went white in the moonbeams.

“Mr. Ayscough!” he gasped. “S’elp me!—there’s a dead man here! Look for yourself!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE EMPTY HOUSE

Ayscough had manifested a certain restiveness and dislike to the proceedings ever since his companion had induced him to enter the back door of Molteno Lodge—these doings appeared to him informal and irregular. But at Melky's sudden exclamation his professional instincts were aroused, and he started forward, staring through the opening in the bushes made by Melky's fingers.

"Good Lord!" he said. "You're right. One of the Chinamen!"

The full moon was high in a cloudless sky by that time, and its rays fell full on a yellow face—and on a dark gash that showed itself in the yellow neck below. Whoever this man was, he had been killed by a savage knife-thrust that had gone straight and unerringly through the jugular vein. Ayscough pointed to a dark wide stain which showed on the earth at the foot of the bushes.

"Stabbed!" he muttered. "Stabbed to death! And dragged in here—look at that—and that!"

He turned, pointing to more stains on the gravelled path behind them—stains which extended, at intervals, almost to the entrance door in the outer wall. And then he drew a box of matches from his pocket, and striking

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one, went closer and held the light down to the dead man's face. Melky, edging closer to his elbow, looked, too.

"One of those Chinamen, without a doubt!" said Ayscough, as the match flickered and died out. "Or, at any rate, a Chinaman. And—he's been dead some days! Well!—this is a go!"

"What's to be done?" asked Melky. "It's murder!"

Ayscough looked around him. He was wondering how it was that a dead man could lie in that garden, close to a busy thoroughfare, along which a regular stream of traffic of all descriptions was constantly passing, for several days, undetected. But a quick inspection of the surroundings explained matters. The house itself filled up one end of the garden; the other three sides were obscured from the adjacent houses and from the street by high walls, high trees, thick bushes. The front gate was locked or latched—no one had entered—no one, save the owner of the knife that had dealt that blow, had known a murdered man lay there behind the laurels. Only the rat, started by Melky's footsteps, had known.

"Stay here!" said Ayscough. "Well—inside the gate, then—don't come out—I don't want to attract attention. There'll be a constable somewhere about."

He walked down to the iron-work gate, Melky following close at his heels, found and unfastened the patent latch, and slipped out into the road. In two minutes he was back again with a policeman. He motioned the man inside and once more fastened the door.

"As you know this beat," he said quietly, as if continuing a conversation already begun, "you'll know the two Chinese gentlemen who have this house?"

"Seen 'em—yes," replied the policeman. "Two quiet little fellows—seen 'em often—generally of an evening."

"Have you seen anything of them lately?" asked Ayscough.

"Well, now I come to think of it, no, I haven't," answered the policeman. "Not for some days."

"Have you noticed that the house was shut up—that there were no lights in the front windows?" enquired the detective.

"Why, as a matter of fact, Mr. Ayscough," said the policeman, "you never do see any lights here—the windows are shuttered. I know that, because I used to give a look round when the house was empty."

"Do you know what servants they kept—these two?" asked Ayscough.

"They kept none!" answered the policeman. "Seems to me—from what bit I saw, you know—they used the house for little more than sleeping in. I've seen 'em go out of a morning, with books and papers under their arms, and come home at night—similar. But there's no servants there. Anything wrong, Mr. Ayscough?"

Ayscough moved toward the bushes.

"There's this much wrong," he answered. "There's one of 'em lying dead behind those laurels with a knife-thrust through his throat! And I should say, from the look of things, that he's been lying there several days. Look here!"

The policeman looked—and beyond a sharp exclamation, remained stolid. He glanced at his companions,

all more or less known to each other. Remember how rarely it is that we ever see a strange face amongst us."

Nevertheless, the very next time these two entered the secret gambling haunt at Barthelemy's, they found a strange face and figure there in those of Banister King. That gentleman, once admitted to membership of the Amaranth Club, had soon penetrated to the inner circle of Barthelemy's chief patrons. Miss Linkinshaw, believed to be a shrewd judge of young men about town, had stood sponsor for him; Barthelemy himself had, in his usual fashion, ascertained all that he wished to know about King's financial standing. There was nothing that was not satisfactory about that: King was a wealthy man. And Barthelemy, who could size and reckon up a fellow-being as smartly as any man in London, had put his new member through casual examinations, and had come to the conclusion that he was a good deal of an eccentric who lived the bizarre and the out-of-the-way in life, and desired to see and do things from a sheer interest in the oddities of human nature. He considered King an absolutely safe man to admit, and also a profitable man to know. Thenceforward, his uncommon figure, meagre face, and unruly hair were seen with regularity around the green tables whereat Mr. Barthelemy's clients sported with fortune. And Banister King quickly became known at those tables and in the quiet alcoves of those rooms for something else than his odd looks and tall figure. He appeared to have been born with an extra double share of gambler's luck. Nothing that he touched

"The door's open!" he exclaimed. "Open! Not even on the latch. Come on!"

Melky shrank back at the prospect of the unlighted hall. There was a horror in the garden, in that bright moonlight—what might there not be in that black, silent house?

"Well, turn that there bull's eye on!" he said. "I don't half fancy this sort of exploration. We'd ought to have had revolvers, you know."

Ayscough turned on the light and advanced into the hall. There was nothing there beyond what one would expect to see in the hall of a well-furnished house, nor was there anything but good furniture, soft carpets, and old pictures to look at in the first room into which he and Melky glanced. But in the room behind there were evidences of recent occupation—a supper-table was laid: there was food on it, a cold fowl, a tongue—one plate had portions of both these viands laid on it, with a knife and fork crossed above them; on another plate close by, a slice of bread lay, broken and crumbled—all the evidences showed that supper had been laid for two, that only one had sat down to it: that he had been interrupted at the very beginning of his meal—a glass half-full of a light French wine stood near the pushed-aside plate.

"Looks as if one of 'em had been having a meal, had had to leave it, and had never come back to it," remarked Ayscough. "Him outside, no doubt. Let's see the other rooms."

There was nothing to see beyond what they would have expected to see—except that in one of the bedrooms, in a drawer pulled out from a dressing-table and left open, lay a quantity of silver and copper, with here and there

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a gold coin shining amongst it. Ayscough made a significant motion of his head at the sight.

"Another proof of—hurry!" he said. "Somebody's cleared out of this place about as quick as he could! Money left lying about—unfinished meal—door open—all sure indications. Well, we've seen enough for the present. Our people'll make a thorough search later. Come downstairs again."

Neither Ayscough nor Melky were greatly inclined for conversation or speculation, and they waited in silence near the gate, both thinking of the still figure lying behind the laurel bushes until the police came. Then followed whispered consultations between Ayscough and the inspector, and arrangements for the removal of the dead man to the mortuary and the guardianship and thorough search of the house—and that done, Ayscough beckoned Melky out into the road.

"Glad to be out of that—for this time, anyway!" he said, with an air of relief. "There's too much atmosphere of murder and mystery—what they call Oriental mystery—for me in there, Mr. Rubinstein! Now then, there's something we can do, at once. Did I understand you to say these two were medical students at University College?"

"So Mr. Penniket said," replied Melky. "S'elp me! I never heard of 'em till this afternoon!"

"You're going to hear a fine lot about 'em before long, anyway!" remarked Ayscough.

"Well—we'll just drive on to Gower Street—somebody'll know something about 'em there, I reckon."

He walked forward until he came to the cab-rank at

the foot of St. John's Wood Road, where he bundled Melky into a taxi-cab, and bade the driver get away to University College Hospital at his best pace. There was little delay in carrying out that order, but it was not such an easy task on arrival at their destination to find any one who could give Ayscough the information he wanted. At last, after they had waited some time in a reception room a young member of the house-staff came in and looked an enquiry.

"What is it you want to know about these two Chinese students?" he asked a little impatiently, with a glance at Ayscough's card. "Is anything wrong?"

"I want to know a good deal!" answered Ayscough. "If not just now, later. You know the two men I mean—Chang Li and Chen Li—brothers, I take it?"

"I know them—they've been students here since about last Christmas," answered the young surgeon. "As a matter of fact they're not brothers—though they're very much alike, and both have the same surname—if Li is a surname. They're friends—not brothers, so they told us."

"When did you see them last?" asked Ayscough.

"Not for some days, now you mention it," replied the surgeon. "Several days. I was remarking on that today—I missed them from a class."

"You say they're very much alike," remarked the detective. "I suppose you can tell one from the other?"

"Of course! But—what is this? I see you're a detective sergeant. Are they in any bother—trouble?"

"The fact of the case," answered Ayscough, "is just this—one of them's lying dead at our mortuary, and I

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shall be much obliged if you'll step into my cab outside and come and identify him. Listen—it's a case of murder!"

Twenty minutes later, Ayseough, leading the young house-surgeon into a grim and silent room, turned aside the sheet from a yellow face.

"Which one of 'em is it?" he asked.

The house-surgeon started as he saw the wound in the dead man's throat.

"This is Chen!" he answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE £500 BANK NOTE

Ayscough drew the sheet over the dead man's face and signed to his companion to follow him outside, to a room where Melky Rubinstein, still gravely meditating over the events of the evening, was awaiting their re-appearance.

"So that," said Ayscough, jerking his thumb in the direction of the mortuary, "that's Chen Li! You're certain?"

"Chen Li! without a doubt!" answered the house-surgeon. "I know him well!"

"The younger of the two?" suggested Ayscough.

The house-surgeon shook his head.

"I can't say as to that," he answered. "It would be difficult to tell which of two Chinese, of about the same age, was the older. But that's Chen. He and the other, Chang Li, are very much alike, but Chen was a somewhat smaller and shorter man."

"What do you know of them?" inquired Ayscough. "Can you say what's known at your hospital?"

"Very little," replied the house-surgeon. "They entered, as students there—we have several foreigners—about last Christmas—perhaps at the New Year. All that I know of them is that they were like most East-erns—very quiet, unassuming, inoffensive fellows, very

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assiduous in their studies and duties, never giving any trouble, and very punctual in their attendance."

"And, you say, they haven't been seen at the hospital for some days?" continued Ayscough. "Now, can you tell me—it's important—since what precise date they've been absent?"

The house-surgeon reflected for a moment—then he suddenly drew out a small memorandum book from an inner pocket.

"Perhaps I can," he answered, turning the pages over. "Yes—both these men should have been in attendance on me—a class of my own, you know—on the 20th, at 10.35. They didn't turn up. I've never seen them since—in fact, I'm sure they've never been at the hospital since."

"The 20th?" observed Ayscough. He looked at Melky, who was paying great attention to the conversation. "Now let's see—old Mr. Multenius met his death on the afternoon of the 18th. Parslett was poisoned on the night of the 19th. Um!"

"And Parslett was picked up about half-way between the Chink's house and his own place, Mr. Ayscough—don't you forget that!" muttered Melky. "I'm not forgetting—don't you make no error!"

"You don't know anything more that you could tell us about these two?" asked the detective, nodding reassuringly at Melky and then turning to the house-surgeon. "Any little thing?—you never know what helps."

"I can't!" said the house-surgeon, who was obviously greatly surprised by what he had seen and heard. "These Easterns keep very much to themselves, you know. I can't think of anything."

"Don't know anything of their associates—friends—acquaintances?" suggested Ayscough. "I suppose they had some—amongst your students?"

"I never saw them in company with anybody—particularly—except a young Japanese who was in some of their classes," replied the house-surgeon. "I have seen them talking with him—in Gower Street."

"What's his name?" asked Ayscough, pulling out a note-book.

"Mr. Mori Yada," answered the house-surgeon promptly. "He lives in Gower Street—I don't know the precise number of the house. Yes, that's the way to spell his name. He's the only man I know who seemed to know these two."

"Have you seen him lately?" asked Ayscough.

"Oh, yes—regularly—today, in fact," said the house-surgeon.

He waited a moment in evident expectation of other questions; as the detective asked none—"I gather," he remarked, "that Chang Li has disappeared?"

"The house these two occupied is empty," replied Ayscough.

"I am going to suggest something," said the house-surgeon. "I know—from personal observation—that there is a tea-shop in Tottenham Court Road—a sort of quiet, privately-owned place—Pilmansay's—which these two used to frequent. I don't know if that's of any use to you?"

"Any detail is of use, Sir," answered Ayscough, making another note. "Now, I'll tell this taxi-man to drive you back to the hospital. I shall call there tomorrow

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morning, and I shall want to see this young Japanese gentleman, too. I daresay you see that this is a case of murder—and there's more behind it!"

"You suspect Chang Li?" suggested the house-surgeon as they went out to the cab.

"Couldn't say that—yet," replied Ayscough, grimly. "For anything I know, Chang Li may have been murdered, too. But I've a pretty good notion what Chen Li was knifed for!"

When the house-surgeon had gone away, Ayscough turned to Melky.

"Come back to Molteno Lodge," he said. "They're searching it. Let's see if they've found anything of importance."

The house which had been as lifeless and deserted when Melky and the detective visited it earlier in the evening was full enough of energy and animation when they went back. One policeman kept guard at the front gate; another at the door of the yard; within the house itself, behind closed doors and drawn shutters and curtains, every room was lighted and the lynx-eyed men were turning the place upside down. One feature of the search struck the newcomers immediately—the patch of ground whereon Melky had found the dead man had been carefully roped off. Ayscough made a significant motion of his hand towards it.

"Good!" he said, "that shows they've found footprints. That may be useful. Let's hear what else they've found."

The man in charge of these operations was standing within the dining-room when Ayscough and Melky walked

in, and he at once beckoned them into the room and closed the door.

"We've made two or three discoveries," he said, glancing at Ayscough. "To start with, there were footprints of a rather unusual sort round these bushes where the man was lying—so I've had it carefully fenced in around there—we'll have a better look at 'em, in daylight. Very small prints, you understand—more like a woman's than a man's."

Ayscough's sharp eyes turned to the hearth—there were two or three pairs of slippers lying near the fender and he pointed to them.

"These Chinamen have very small feet, I believe," he said. "The footprints are probably theirs. Well—what else?"

"This," answered the man in charge, producing a small parcel from the side-pocket of his coat, and proceeding to divest it of a temporary wrapping. "Perhaps Mr. Rubinstein will recognize it. We found it thrown away in a fire-grate in one of the bedrooms upstairs—you see, it's half burnt."

He produced a small, stoutly-made cardboard box, some three inches square, the outer surface of which was covered with a thick, glossy-surfaced dark-green paper, on which certain words were deeply impressed in gilt letters. The box was considerably charred and only fragments of the lettering on the lid remained intact—but it was not difficult to make out what the full wording had been.

. . . . enius,
. . . .nd jeweller,
. . . .ed Street.

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"That's one of the late Mr. Multenius's boxes," affirmed Melky at once. "Daniel Multenius, Pawnbroker and Jeweller, Praed Street—that's the full wording. Found in a fireplace, d'ye say, mister? Ah—and what had he taken out of it before he threw the box away, now, Mr. Ayscough—whoever it was that did throw it away?"

"That blessed orange and yellow diamond, I should think!" said Ayscough. "Of course! Well, anything else?"

The man in charge carefully wrapped up and put away the jeweller's box; then, with a significant glance at his fellow-detective, he slipped a couple of fingers into his waistcoat pocket and drew out what looked like a bit of crumpled paper.

"Aye!" he answered. "This! Found it—just there! Lying on the floor, at the end of this table."

He opened out the bit of crumpled paper as he spoke and held it towards the other two. Ayscough stared, almost incredulously, and Melky let out a sharp exclamation.

"S'elp us!" he said. "A five-hundred-pound bank-note!"

"That's about it," remarked the exhibitor. "Bank of England note for five hundred of the best! And—a good 'un, too. Lying on the floor."

"Take care of it," said Ayscough laconically. "Well—you haven't found any papers, documents, or anything of that sort, that give any clue?"

"There's a lot of stuff there," answered the man in charge, pointing to a pile of books and papers on the

table, "but it seems to be chiefly exercises and that sort of thing. I'll look through it myself, later."

"See if you can find any letters, addresses, and so on," counselled Ayscough. He turned over some of the books, all of them medical works and text-books, opening some of them at random. And suddenly he caught sight of the name which the house-surgeon had given him half-an-hour before, written on a fly-leaf: Mori Yada, 491, Gower Street—and an idea came into his mind. He bade the man in charge keep his eyes open and leave nothing unexamined, and tapping Melky's arm, led him outside. "Look here!" he said, drawing out his watch, as they crossed the hall. "it's scarcely ten o'clock, and I've got the address of that young Jap. Come on—we'll go and ask him a question or two."

So for the second time that evening, Melky, who was beginning to feel as if he were on a chase which pursued anything but a straight course, found himself in Gower Street again, and followed Ayscough along, wondering what was going to happen next, until the detective paused at the door of a tall house in the middle of the long thoroughfare and rang the bell. A smart maid answered that ring and looked dubiously at Ayscough as he proffered a request to see Mr. Mori Yada. Yes—Mr. Yada was at home, but he didn't like to see any one, of an evening when he was at his studies, and—in fact he'd given orders not to be disturbed at that time.

"I think he'll see me, all the same," said Ayscough, drawing out one of his professional cards. "Just give him that, will you, and tell him my business is very important."

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He turned to Melky when the girl, still looking unwilling, had gone away upstairs, and gave him a nudge of the elbow.

"When we get up there—as we shall," whispered Ayscough, "you watch this Jap chap while I talk to him. Study his face—and see if anything surprises him."

"Biggest order, mister—with a Jap!" muttered Melky. "Might as well tell me to watch a stone image—their faces is like wood!"

"Try it!" said Ayscough. "Flicker of an eyelid—twist of the lip—anything! Here's the girl back again."

A moment later Melky, treading close on the detective's heels, found himself ushered into a brilliantly-lighted, rather over-heated room, somewhat luxuriously furnished, wherein, in the easiest of chairs, a cigar in his lips, a yellow-backed novel in his hand, sat a slimly-built, elegant young gentleman whose face was melting to a smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MR. MORI YADA

Ayscough was on his guard as soon as he saw that smile. He had had some experience of various national characteristics in his time, and he knew that when an Eastern meets you with a frank and smiling countenance you had better keep all your wits about you. He began the exercise of his own with a polite bow—while executing it, he took a rapid inventory of Mr. Mori Yada. About—as near as he could judge—two or three and twenty; a black-haired, black-eyed young gentleman; evidently fastidious about his English clothes, his English linen, his English ties, smart socks, and shoes—a good deal of a dandy, in short—and, judging from his surroundings, very fond of English comfort—and not averse to the English custom of taking a little spirituous refreshment with his tobacco. A decanter stood on the table at his elbow; a syphon of mineral water reared itself close by; a tumbler was within reach of Mr. Yada's slender yellowish fingers.

“Servant, Sir!” said Ayscough. “Detective Sergeant Ayscough of the Criminal Investigation Department—friend of mine, this, Sir, Mr. Yada, I believe—Mr. Mori Yada?”

Mr. Yada smiled again, and without rising, indicated two chairs.

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"Oh, yes!" he said in excellent English accents. "Pleased to see you—will you take a chair—and your friend! You want to talk to me?"

Ayscough sat down and unbuttoned his overcoat.

"Much obliged, Sir," he said. "Yes—the fact is, Mr. Yada, I called to see you on a highly important matter that's arisen. Your name, sir, was given to me tonight by one of the junior house-surgeons at the hospital up the street—Dr. Pittery."

"Oh, yes, Dr. Pittery—I know," agreed Yada. "Yes?"

"Dr. Pittery tells me, sir," continued Ayscough, "that you know two Chinese gentlemen who are fellow-students of yours at the hospital, Mr. Yada?"

The Japanese bowed his dark head and blew out a mouthful of smoke from his cigar.

"Yes!" he answered readily, "Mr. Chang Li—Mr. Chen Li. Oh, yes!"

"I want to ask you a question, Mr. Yada," said Ayscough, bending forward and assuming an air of confidence. "When did you see those two gentlemen last—either of them?"

Yada leaned back in his comfortably padded chair and cast his quick eyes towards the ceiling. Suddenly he jumped to his feet.

"You take a little drop of whisky-and-soda?" he said hospitably, pushing a clean glass towards Ayscough. "Yes—I will get another glass for your friend, too. Help yourselves, please, then—I will look in my diary for an answer to your question. You excuse me, one moment."

He walked across the room to a writing cabinet which stood in one corner, and took up a small book that lay on the blotting-pad; while he turned over its pages, Ayscough, helping himself and Melky to a drink, winked at his companion with a meaning expression.

"I have not seen either Mr. Chang Li or Mr. Chen Li since the morning of the 18th November," suddenly said Yada. He threw the book back on the desk, and coming to the hearthrug, took up a position with his back to the fire and his hands in the pockets of his trousers. He nodded politely as his visitors raised their glasses to him. "Is anything the matter, Mr. Detective-Sergeant?" he asked.

Ayscough contrived to press his foot against Melky's as he gave a direct answer to this question.

"The fact of the case is, Mr. Yada," he said, "one of these two young men has been murdered! murdered, sir!"

Yada's well-defined eyebrows elevated themselves—but the rest of his face was immobile. He looked fixedly at Ayscough for a second or two—then he let out one word.

"Which?"

"According to Dr. Pittery—Chen Li," answered Ayscough. "Dr. Pittery identified him. Murdered, Mr. Yada, murdered! Knifed!—in the throat."

The reiteration of the word murdered appeared to yield the detective some sort of satisfaction—but it apparently made no particular impression on the Japanese. Again he rapped out one word.

"Where?"

"His body was found in the garden of the house they rented in Maida Vale," replied Ayscough. "Molteno

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Lodge. No doubt you've visited them there, Mr. Yada?"

"I have been there—yes, a few times," assented Yada. "Not very lately. But—where is Chang Li?"

"That's what we don't know—and what we want to know," said Ayscough. "He's not been seen at the hospital since the 20th. He didn't turn up there—nor Chen, either, at a class, that day. And you say you haven't seen them either since the 18th?"

"I was not at the hospital on the 19th," replied Yada. He threw away the end of his cigar, picked up a fresh one from a box which stood on the table, pushed the box towards his visitors, and drew out a silver match-box. "What are the facts of this murder, Mr. Detective-Sergeant?" he asked quietly. "Murder is not done without some object—as a rule."

Ayscough accepted the offered cigar, passed the box to Melky and while he lighted his selection, thought quietly. He was playing a game with the Japanese, and it was necessary to think accurately and quickly. And suddenly he made up his mind and assumed an air of candour.

"It's like this, Mr. Yada," he said. "I may as well tell you all about it. You've doubtless read all about this Praed Street mystery in the newspapers? Well, now, some very extraordinary developments have arisen out of the beginnings of that. It turns out."

Melky sat by, disturbed and uncomfortable, while Ayscough reeled off a complete narrative of the recent discoveries to the suave-mannered, phlegmatic, calmly-listening figure on the hearthrug. He did not understand the detective's doings—it seemed to him the height

of folly to tell a stranger, and an Eastern stranger at that, all about the fact that there was a diamond worth eighty thousand pounds at the bottom of these mysteries and murders. But he discharged his own duties, and watched Yada intently—and failed to see one single sign of anything beyond ordinary interest in his impassive face.

“So there it is, sir,” concluded Ayscough. “I’ve no doubt whatever that Chen Li called at Multenius’s shop to pay the rent; that he saw the diamond in the old man’s possession and swagged him for it; that Parslett saw Chen Li slip away from that side-door and, hearing of Multenius’s death, suspected Chen Li of it and tried to blackmail him; that Chen Li poisoned Parslett—and that Chen Li himself was knifed for that diamond. Now—by whom? Chang Li has—disappeared!”

“You suspect Chang Li?” asked Yada.

“I do,” exclaimed Ayscough. “A Chinaman—a diamond worth every penny of eighty thousand pounds—Ah!” He suddenly lifted his eyes to Yada with a quick enquiry. “How much do you know of these two?” he asked.

“Little—beyond the fact that they were fellow-students of mine,” answered Yada. “I occasionally visited them—occasionally they visited me—that is all.”

“Dr. Pittery says they weren’t brothers?” suggested Ayscough.

“So I understood,” assented Yada. “Friends.”

“You can’t tell us anything of their habits?—haunts?—what they usually did with themselves when they weren’t at the hospital?” asked the detective.

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"I should say that when they weren't at the hospital, they were at their house—reading," answered Yada, drily. "They were hard workers."

Ayscough rose from his chair.

"Well, much obliged to you, Sir," he said. "As your name was mentioned as some sort of a friend of theirs, I came to you. Of course, most of what I've told you will be in all the papers tomorrow. If you should hear anything of this Chang Li, you'll communicate with us, Mr. Yada?"

The Japanese smiled—openly.

"Most improbable, Mr. Detective-Sergeant!" he answered. "I know no more than what I have said. For more information, you should go to the Chinese Legation."

"Good idea, sir—thank you," said Ayscough.

He bowed himself and Melky out; once outside the street-door he drew his companion away towards a part which lay in deep shadow. Some repairing operations to the exterior of a block of houses were going on there; underneath a scaffolding which extended over the sidewalk Ayscough drew Melky to a halt.

"You no doubt wondered why I told that chap so much?" he whispered. "Especially about that diamond! But I had my reasons—and particularly for telling him about its value."

"It isn't what I should ha' done, Mr. Ayscough," said Melky, "and it didn't ought to come out in the newspapers, neither—so I think! 'Tain't a healthy thing to let the public know there's an eighty-thousand pound dia-

mond loose somewhere in London—and as to telling that slant-eyed fellow in there—”

“You wait a bit, my lad!” interrupted Ayscough. “I had my reasons—good ’uns. Now, look here, we’re going to watch that door awhile. If the Jap comes out—as I’ve an idea he will—we’re going to follow. And as you’re younger, and slimmer, and less conspicuous than I am, if he should emerge, keep on the shadowy side of the street, at a safe distance, and follow him as cleverly as you can. I’ll follow you.”

“What new game’s this?” asked Melky.

“Never mind!” replied Ayscough. “And, if it does come to following, and he should take a cab, contrive to be near—there’s a good many people about, and if you’re careful he’ll never see you. And—there, now, what did I tell you? He’s coming out, now! Be handy—more depends on it than you’re aware of.”

Yada, seen clearly in the moonlight which flooded that side of the street, came out of the door which they had left a few minutes earlier. His smart suit of grey tweed had disappeared under a heavy fur-collared overcoat; a black bowler hat surmounted his somewhat pallid face. He looked neither to right nor left, but walked swiftly up the street in the direction of the Euston Road. And when he had gone some thirty yards, Ayscough pushed Melky before him out of their retreat.

“You go first,” he whispered, “I’ll come after you. Keep an eye on him as far as you can—didn’t I tell you he’d come out when we’d left? Be wary!”

Melky slipped away up the street on the dark side

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and continued to track the slim figure quickly advancing in the moonlight. He followed until they had passed the front of the hospital—a few yards further, and Yada suddenly crossed the road in the direction of the Underground Railway. He darted in at the entrance to the City-bound train, and disappeared, and Melky, uncertain what to do, almost danced with excitement until Ayseough came leisurely towards him. “Quick! quick!” exclaimed Melky. “He’s gone down there—City trains. He’ll be off unless you’re on to him!”

But Ayseough remained quiescent and calmly relighted his cigar.

“All right, my lad,” he said. “Let him ~~go~~—just now. I’ve seen—what I expected to see!”

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE MORTUARY

Melky, who had grown breathless in his efforts to carry out his companion's wishes, turned and looked at him with no attempt to conceal his wonder.

"Well, s'elp me if you ain't a cool 'un, Mr. Ayscough!" he exclaimed. "Here you troubles to track a chap to this here Underground Railway, seen him pop into it like a rabbit into a hole—and let's him go! What did we follow him up Gower Street for? Just to see him set off for a ride?"

"All right, my lad!" repeated Ayscough. "You don't quite understand our little ways. Wait here a minute."

He drew one of his cards from his pocket and carrying it into the booking office exchanged a few words with the clerk at the window. Presently he rejoined Melky. "He took a ticket for Whitechapel," remarked Ayscough as he strolled quietly up. "Ah! now what does a young Japanese medical student want going down that way at eleven o'clock at night? Something special, no doubt, Mr. Rubinstein. However, I'm going westward just now. Just going to have a look in at the Great Western Hotel, to see if Mr. Purdie heard anything from that American chap—and then I'm for home and bed. Like to come to the hotel with me?"

"Strikes me we might as well make a night of it!" remarked Melky as they recrossed the road and sought

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a west-bound train. "We've had such an evening as I never expected! Mr. Ayscough! when on earth is this going to come to something like a clearing-up?"

Ayscough settled himself in a corner of a smoking-carriage and leaned back.

"My own opinion," he said, "is that it's coming to an end. Tomorrow, the news of the Chinaman's murder'll be the talk of the town. And if that doesn't fetch Levendale out of whatever cranny he's crept into, hanged if I know what will!"

"Ah! you think that, do you?" said Melky. "But—why should that news fetch him out?"

"Don't know!" replied Ayscough, almost unconcernedly. "But I'm almost certain that it will. You see—I think Levendale's looking for Chen Li. Now, if Levendale hears that Chen Li's lying dead in our mortuary—what? See?"

Melky murmured that Mr. Ayscough was a cute 'un, and relapsed into thought until the train pulled up at Praed Street. He followed the detective up the streets and across the road to the hotel, dumbly wondering how many times that day he had been in and about that quarter on this apparently interminable chase. He was getting dazed—but Ayscough who was still smoking the cigar which Yada had given him, strode along into the hotel entrance apparently as fresh as paint.

Purdie had a private sitting-room in connection with his bedroom, and there they found him and Lauriston, both smoking pipes and each evidently full of thought and speculation. They jumped to their feet as the detective entered.

"I say!" exclaimed Lauriston. "Is this true?—this about the Chinese chap? Is it what they think at your police-station?—connected with the other affairs? We've been waiting, hoping you'd come in!"

"Ah!" said Ayscough, dropping into a chair. "We've been pretty busy, me and Mr. Rubinstein there—we've had what you might call a pretty full evening's work of it. Yes—it's true enough, gentlemen—another step in the ladder—another brick in the building! We're getting on, Mr. Purdie, we're getting on! So you've been round to our place?—they told you, there!"

"They gave us a mere outline," answered Purdie. "Just the bare facts. I suppose you've heard nothing of the other Chinaman?"

"Not a circumstance—as yet," said Ayscough. "But I'm in hopes—I've done a bit, I think, towards it—with Mr. Rubinstein's help, though he doesn't quite understand my methods. But you, gentlemen—I came in to hear if you'd anything to tell about Guyler. What did he think about what John Purvis had to tell us this afternoon?"

"He wasn't surprised," answered Purdie. "Don't you remember that he assured us from the very start that diamonds would be found to be at the bottom of this. But he surprised us!"

"Aye? How?" asked Ayscough. "Some news?"

"Guyler swears that he saw Stephen Purvis this very morning," replied Purdie. "He's confident of it!"

"Saw Stephen Purvis—this very morning!" exclaimed Ayscough. "Where, now?"

"Guyler had business down in the City—in the far

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end of it," said Purdie. "He was crossing Bishopsgate when he saw Stephen Purvis—he swears it was Stephen Purvis!—nothing can shake him! He, Purvis, was just turning the corner into a narrow alley running out of the street. Guyler rushed after him—he'd disappeared. Guyler waited, watching that alley, he says, like a cat watches a mouse-hole—and all in vain. He watched for an hour—it was no good."

"Pooh!" said Ayscough. "If it was Purvis, he'd walked straight through the alley and gone out at the other end."

"No!" remarked Lauriston. "At least, not according to Guyler. Guyler says it was a long, narrow alley—Purvis could have reached one end by the time he'd reached the other. He says—Guyler—that on each side of that alley there are suites of offices—he reckoned there were a few hundred separate offices in the lot, and that it would take him a week to make enquiry at the doors of each. But he's certain that Purvis disappeared into one block of them and dead certain that it was Stephen Purvis that he saw. So—Purvis is alive!"

"Where's the other Purvis—the farmer?" asked Ayscough.

"Stopping with Guyler at the Great Northern," answered Lauriston. "We've all four been down in the City, looking round, this evening. Guyler and John Purvis are going down again first thing in the morning. John Purvis, of course, is immensely relieved to know that Guyler's certain about his brother. I say!—do you know what Guyler's theory is about that diamond of Stephen's?"

"No—and what might Mr. Guyler's theory be, now Mr. Lauriston?" enquired the detective. "There's such a lot of ingenious theories about that one may as well try to take in another. Mr. Rubinstein there is about weary of theories."

But Melky was pricking his ears at the mere mention of anything relating to the diamond.

"That's his chaff, Mr. Lauriston," he said. "Never mind him! What does Guyler think?"

"Well, of course, Guyler doesn't know yet about the Chinese development," said Lauriston. "Guyler thinks the robbery has been the work of a gang—a clever lot of diamond thieves who knew about Stephen Purvis's find of the orange-yellow thing and put in a lot of big work about getting it when it reached England. And he believes that that gang has kidnapped Levendale, and that Stephen Purvis is working in secret to get at them. That's Guyler's notion, anyhow."

"Well!" said Ayscough. "And there may be something in it! For this search—how do we know that at any rate one of these Chinamen mayn't have had some connection with this gang? You never know—and to get a dead straight line at a thing's almost impossible. However, we've taken steps to have the news about the diamond and about this Chen Li appear in tomorrow morning's papers, and if that doesn't rouse the whole town—"

A tap at the door prefaced the entrance of a waiter, who looked apologetically at its inmates.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen," he said, "Mr. Ayscough?

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Gentleman outside would like a word with you, if you please, sir."

Ayscough picked up his hat and walked out—there, waiting a little way down the corridor, an impressive figure in his big black cloak and wide-brimmed hat, stood Dr. Mirandolet. He strode forward as the detective advanced.

"I heard you were here, so I came up," he said, leading Ayscough away. "Look here, my friend—one of your people has told me of this affair at Molteno Lodge—the discovery of the Chinaman's dead body."

"That young fellow, Rubinstein, who called on you early this evening, and got me to accompany him discovered it," said Ayscough, who was wondering what the doctor was after. "I was with him."

"I have heard, too," continued Mirandolet, "also from one of your people, about the strange story of the diamond which came out this afternoon, from the owner's brother. Now—I'll tell you why after—I want to see that dead Chinaman! I've a particular reason. Will you come with me to the mortuary?"

Ayscough's curiosity was aroused by Mirandolet's manner, and without going back to Purdie's room, he set out with him. Mirandolet remained strangely silent until they came to the street in which the mortuary stood.

"A strange and mysterious matter this, my friend!" he said. "That little Rubinstein man might have had some curious premonition when he came to me tonight with his odd question about Chinese!"

"Just what I said myself, doctor!" agreed Ayscough.

"It did look as if he'd a sort of foreboding, eh? But—Hullo!"

He stopped short as a taxi-cab driven at a considerable speed, came rushing down the street and passing them swiftly turned into the wider road beyond. And the sudden exclamation was forced from his lips because it seemed to him that as the cab sped by he saw a yellow-hued face within it—for the fraction of a second. Quick as that glimpse was, Ayscough was still quicker as he glanced at the number on the back of the car—and memorized it.

"Odd!" he muttered, "odd! Now, I could have sworn —" He broke off, and hurried after Mirandolet who had stridden ahead. "Here we are, doctor," he said, as they came to the door of the mortuary. "There's a man on night duty here, so there's no difficulty about getting in."

There was a drawing of bolts, a turning of keys; the door opened, and a man looked out and seeing Ayscough and Dr. Mirandolet, admitted them into an ante-room and turned up the gas.

"We want to see that Chinaman, George," said the detective. "Shan't keep you long."

"There's a young foreign doctor just been to see him, Mr. Ayscough," said the man. "You'd pass his car down the street—he hasn't been gone three minutes. Young Japanese—brought your card with him."

Ayscough turned on the man as if he had given him the most startling news in the world.

"What?" he exclaimed, "Japanese? Brought my card?"

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“Showed me it as soon as he got here,” answered the attendant, surprised at Ayscough’s amazement. “Said you’d given it to him, so that he could call here and identify the body. So, of course, I let him go in.”

Ayscough opened his mouth in sheer amazement. But before he could get out a word, Mirandolet spoke, seizing the mortuary-keeper by the arm in his eagerness.

“You let that man—a Japanese—see the dead Chinaman—*alone?*” he demanded.

“Why, of course!” the attendant answered surlily. “He’d Mr. Ayscough’s card, and—”

Mirandolet dropped the man’s arm and threw up his own long white hands.

“Merciful Powers!” he vociferated. “He has stolen the diamond!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE MIRANDOLET THEORY

The silence that followed on this extraordinary exclamation was suddenly broken: the mortuary keeper, who had been advancing towards a door at the side of the room, dropped a bunch of keys. The strange metallic sound of their falling roused Ayscough, who had started aside, and was staring, open-mouthed, at Mirandolet's waving hands. He caught the doctor by the arm.

"What on earth do you mean?" he growled. "Speak man—what is it?"

Mirandolet suddenly laughed.

"What is it?" he exclaimed. "Precisely what I said, in plain language! That fellow has, of course, gone off with the diamond—worth eighty thousand pounds! Your card!—Oh, man, man, whatever have you been doing? Be quick!—who is this Japanese?—how came he by your card? Quick, I say!—if you want to be after him!"

"Hanged if I know what this means!" muttered Ayscough. "As to who he is—if he's the fellow I gave a card to, he's a young Japanese medical student, one Yada, that was a friend of those Chinese—I called on him to-night, with Rubinstein, to see if we could pick up a bit of information. Of course, I sent in my professional card to him. But—we saw him set off to the East End!"

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“Bah!” laughed Mirandolet. “He has—what you call done you brown, my friend! He came—here! And he has got away—got a good start—with that diamond in his pocket!”

“What the devil do you mean by that?” said Ayscough, hotly. “Diamond! Diamond! Where should he find the diamond—here? In a deadhouse? What are you talking about?”

Mirandolet laughed again, and giving the detective a look that was very like one of pitying contempt, turned to the amazed mortuary keeper.

“Show us that dead man!” he said.

The mortuary keeper, who had allowed his keys to lie on the floor during this strange scene, picked them up, and selecting one, opened, and threw back the door by which he was standing. He turned on the light in the mortuary chamber, and Mirandolet strode in, with Ayscough, sullen and wondering, at his heels.

Chen Li lay where the detective had last seen him, still and rigid, the sheet drawn carefully over his yellow face. Without a word Mirandolet drew that sheet aside, and motioning his companion to draw nearer, pointed to a skull-cap of thin blue silk which fitted over the Chinaman’s head.

“You see that!” he whispered. “You know what’s beneath it!—something that no true Chinaman ever parts with, even if he does come to Europe, and does wear English dress and English headgear—his pigtail! Look here!”

He quietly moved the skull-cap, and showed the two astonished men a carefully-coiled mass of black hair,

wound round and round the back of the head. And into it he slipped his own long, thin fingers—to draw them out again with an exclamation which indicated satisfaction with his own convictions.

“Just as I said,” he remarked. “Gone! Mr. Detective—that’s where Chen Li hid the diamond—and that Japanese man has got it. And now—you’d better be after him—half-an-hour’s start to him is as good as a week’s would be to you.”

He drew the sheet over the dead face and strode out, and Ayscough followed, angry, mystified, and by no means convinced.

“Look here!” he said, as they reached the ante-room; “that’s all very well, Dr. Mirandolet, but it’s only supposition on your part!”

“Supposition that you’ll find to be absolute truth, my good friend!” retorted Mirandolet, calmly. “I know the Chinese—better than you think. As soon as I heard of this affair tonight, I came to you to put you up to the Chinese trick of secreting things of value in their pigtailed—it did not occur to me that the diamond might be there in this case, but I thought you would probably find something. But when we reached this mortuary, and I heard that a Japanese had been here, presenting your card when he had no business to present it, I guessed immediately what had happened—and now that you tell me that you told him all about this affair, well—I am certain of my assertion. Mr. Detective—go after the diamond!”

He turned as if to leave the place, and Ayscough followed.

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"He mayn't been after the diamond at all!" he said, still resentful and incredulous. "Is it very likely he'd think it to be in that dead chap's pigtail when the other man's missing? It's Chang that's got that diamond—not Chen."

"All right, my friend!" replied Mirandolet. "Your wisdom is superior to mine, no doubt. So—I wish you good-night!"

He strode out of the place and turned sharply up the street, and Ayscough, after a growl or two, went back to the mortuary keeper.

"How long was that Jap in there?" he asked, nodding at the death chamber.

"Not a minute, Mr. Ayscough!" replied the man. "In and out again, as you might say."

"Did he say anything when he came out?" enquired the detective.

"He did—two words," answered the keeper. "He said, 'That's he!' and walked straight out, and into his car."

"And when he came he told you I'd sent him?" demanded Ayscough.

"Just that—and showed me your card," assented the man. "Of course, I'd no reason to doubt his word."

"Look here, George!" said Ayscough, "you keep this to yourself! Don't say anything to any of our folks if they come in. I don't half believe what that doctor said just now—but I'll make an enquiry or two. Mum's the word, meanwhile. You understand, George?"

George answered that he understood very well, and Ayscough presently left him. Outside, in the light of

the lamp set over the entrance to the mortuary, he pulled out his watch. Twelve o'clock—midnight. And somewhere, that cursed young Jap was fleeing away through the London streets—having cheated him, Ayscough, at his own game!

He had already reckoned things up in connection with Yada. Yada had been having him—even as Melky Rubinstein had suspected and suggested—all through that conversation at Gower Street. Probably, Yada, from his window in the drawing-room floor of his lodging-house, had watched him and Melky slip across the street and hide behind the hoarding opposite. And then Yada had gone out, knowing he was to be followed, and had tricked them beautifully, getting into an underground train going east, and, in all certainty, getting out again at the next station, chartering a cab, and returning west—with Ayscough's card in his pocket.

But Ayscough knew one useful thing—he had memorized the letters and numbers of the taxi-cab in which Yada had sped by him and Mirandolet, L.C. 2571—he had kept repeating that over and over. Now he took out his note-book and jotted it down—and that done he set off to the police-station, intent first of all on getting in touch with New Scotland Yard by means of the telephone.

Ayscough, like most men of his calling in London, had a considerable amount of general knowledge of things and affairs, and he summoned it to his aid in this instance. He knew that if the Japanese really had become possessed of the orange and yellow diamond (of which supposition, in spite of Mirandolet's positive convictions, he was very sceptical) he would most certainly

make for escape. He would be off to the Continent, hot foot. Now, Ayscough had a good acquaintance with the Continental train services—some hours must elapse before Yada could possibly get a train for Dover, or Folkstone, or Newhaven, or the shortest way across, or to any other ports such as Harwich or Southampton, by a longer route. Obviously, the first thing to do was to have the stations at Victoria, and Charing Cross, and Holborn Viaduct, and London Bridge carefully watched for Yada. And for two weary hours in the middle of the night he was continuously at work on the telephone, giving instructions and descriptions, and making arrangements to spread a net out of which the supposed fugitive could not escape.

And when all that was at last satisfactorily arranged, Ayscough was conscious that it might be for nothing. He might be on a wrong track altogether—due to the suspicions and assertions of that queer man, Mirandolet. There might be some mystery—in Ayscough's opinion there always was mystery wherever Chinese or Japanese or Hindus were concerned. Yada might have some good reason for wishing to see Chen Li's dead body, and have taken advantage of the detective's card to visit it. This extraordinary conduct might be explained. But meanwhile Ayscough could not afford to neglect a chance, and tired as he was, he set out to find the driver of the taxicab whose number he had carefully set down in his notebook.

There was little difficulty in this stage of the proceedings; it was merely a question of time, of visiting a central office and finding the man's name and address. By

six o'clock in the morning Ayscough was at a small house in a shabby street in Kentish Town, interviewing a woman who had just risen to light her fire, and was surlily averse to calling up a husband, who, she said, had not been in bed until nearly four. She was not any more pleased when Ayscough informed her of his professional status—but the man was fetched down.

"You drove a foreigner—a Japanese—to the mortuary in Paddington last night?" said Ayscough, plunging straight into business, after telling the man who he was. "I saw him—just a glimpse of him—in your cab, and I took your number. Now, where did you first pick him up?"

"Outside the Underground, at King's Cross," replied the driver promptly.

This was precisely what Ayscough had expected; so far, so good; his own prescience was proving sure.

"Anything wrong, mister?" asked the driver.

"There may be," said Ayscough. "Well—you picked him up there, and drove him straight to the mortuary?"

"No—I didn't," said the man. "We made a call first. Euston. He went in there, and, I should say, went to the left luggage office, 'cause he came back again with a small suit-case—just a little'un. Then we went on to that mortuary."

Euston! A small suit-case! More facts—Ayscough made notes of them.

"Well," he said, "and when you drove away from the mortuary, where did you go then?"

"Oxford Circus," answered the driver, "set him down

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—his orders—right opposite the Tube Station—t'other side of the street."

"Did you see which way he went—then?" enquired Ayscough.

"I did. Straight along Oxford Street—Tottenham Court Road way," said the driver, "carrying his suitcase—which it was, as I say, on'y a little 'un—and walking very fast. Last I see of him was that, guv'nor."

Ayscough went away and got back to more pretentious regions. He was dead tired and weary with his night's work, and glad to drop in at an early-opened coffee-shop and get some breakfast. While he ate and drank a boy came in with the first editions of the newspapers. Ayscough picked one up—and immediately saw staring headlines:—

THE PADDINGTON MYSTERIES.

NEW AND STARTLING FEATURES.

DIAMOND WORTH £80,000 BEING LOOKED FOR
MURDER IN MAIDA VALE

Ayscough laid down the paper and smiled. Levendale —if not dead—could scarcely fail to see that!

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ONE O'CLOCK MIDNIGHT

Five minutes after Ayscough had gone away with Dr. Mirandolet the hotel servant who had summoned him from Purdie's sitting-room knocked at the door for the second time and put a somewhat mystified face inside.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, glancing at Purdie, who was questioning Melky Rubinstein as to the events of the evening in their relation to the house in Maida Vale. "Two ladies outside, sir—waiting to see you. But they don't want to come in, sir, unless they know who's here—don't want to meet no strangers, sir."

Purdie jumped to his feet, and putting the man aside looked into the dimly-lighted corridor. There, a few paces away, stood Zillah—and, half hidden by her, Mrs. Goldmark.

"Come in—come in!" he exclaimed. "Nobody here but Andie Lauriston and Melky Rubinstein. You've something to tell—something's happened?"

He ushered them into the room, sent the hotel servant, obviously in a state of high curiosity about these happenings, away, and closed the door.

"S'elp me!" exclaimed Melky, "there ain't no other surprises, Zillah? You ain't come round at this time o' night for nothing! What you got to tell, Zillah?—another development?"

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"Mrs. Goldmark has something to tell," answered Zillah. "We didn't know what to do, and you didn't come, Melky—nobody come—and so we locked the house and thought of Mr. Purdie. Mrs. Goldmark has seen somebody!"

"Who?" demanded Melky. "Somebody, now? What somebody?"

"The man that came to her restaurant," replied Zillah. "The man who lost the platinum solitaire!"

Mrs. Goldmark who had dropped into the chair which Purdie had drawn to the side of the table for her, wagged her head thoughtfully.

"This way it was, then," she said, with a dramatic suggestion of personal enjoyment in revealing a new feature of the mystery, "I have a friend who lives in Stanhope Street—Mrs. Isenberg. She sends to me at half-past-ten to tell me she is sick. I go to see her—immediate. I find her very poorly—so! I stop with her till past eleven, doing what I can. Then her sister, she comes—I can do no more—I come away. And I walk through Sussex Square, as my road back to Praed Street and Zillah. But before I am much across Sussex Square, I stop—sudden, like that! For what? Because—I see a man! That man! Him what drops his cuff-link on my table. Oh, yes!"

"You're sure it was that man, Mrs. Goldmark?" enquired Melky, anxiously. "You don't make no mistakes, so?"

"Do I mistake myself if I say I see you, Mr. Rubinstein?" exclaimed Mrs. Goldmark, solemnly and with emphasis. "No, I don't make no mistakes at all. Is

there not gas lamps?—am I not blessed with good eyes? I see him—like as I see you there young gentleman and Zillah. Plain!”

“Well—and what was he doing?” asked Purdie, desirous of getting at facts. “Did he come out of a house, or go into one, or—what?”

“I tell you,” replied Mrs. Goldmark, “everything I tell you—all in good time. It is like this. A taxi-cab comes up—approaching me. It stops—by the pavement. Two men—they get out. Him first. Then another. They pay the driver—then they walk on a little—just a few steps. They go into a house. The other man—he lets them into that house. With a latch-key. The door opens—shuts. They are inside. Then I go to Zillah and tell her what I see. So!”

The three young men exchanged glances, and Purdie turned to the informant.

“Mrs. Goldmark,” he said, “did you know the man who opened the door?”

“Not from another!” replied Mrs. Goldmark. “A stranger to me!”

“Do you know Mr. Levendale—by sight?” asked Purdie.

“Often, since all this begins, I ask myself that question,” said Mrs. Goldmark, “him being, so to speak, a neighbour. No, that I do not, not being able to say he was ever pointed out to me.”

“Well, you can describe the man who pulled out his latch-key and opened the door, anyhow,” remarked Purdie. “You took a good look at him, I suppose?”

“And a good one,” answered Mrs. Goldmark. “He

was one of our people—I saw his nose and his eyes. And I was astonished to see so poor-looking a man have a latch-key to so grand a mansion as that!—he was dressed in poor clothes, and looked dirty and mean.”

“A bearded dark man?” suggested Purdie.

“Not at all,” said Mrs. Goldmark. “A clean-shaved man—though dark he might be.”

Purdie looked at Melky and shook his head.

“That’s not Levendale!” he said. “Clean-shaven! Levendale’s bearded and mustached—and I should say a bit vain of his beard. Um! you’re dead certain, Mrs. Goldmark, about the other man?”

“As that I tell you this,” insisted Mrs. Goldmark. “I see him as plain as what I see him when he calls at my establishment and leaves his jewellery on my table. Oh, yes—I don’t make no mistake, Mr. Purdie.”

Purdie looked again at Melky—this time with an enquiry in his glance.

“Don’t ask me, Mr. Purdie!” said Melky. “I don’t know what to say. Sounds like as if these two went into Levendale’s house. But what man would have a latch-key to that but Levendale himself? More mystery!—ain’t I full of it already? Now if Mr. Ayseough hadn’t gone away—”

“Look here!” said Purdie, coming to a sudden decision, “I’m going round there. I want to know what this means—I’m going to know. You ladies had better go home. If you others like to come as far as the corner of Sussex Square, come. But I’m going to Levendale’s house alone. I’ll find something out.”

He said no more until, Zillah and Mrs. Goldmark hav

ing gone homeward, and he and his two companions having reached a side street leading into Sussex Square, he suddenly paused and demanded their attention!

"I've particular reasons for wanting to go into that house alone," he said. "There's no danger—trust me. But—if I'm not out again in a quarter of an hour or so, you can come there and ask for me. My own impression is that I shall find Levendale there. And—as you're aware, Andie—I know Levendale." He left them standing in the shadow of a projecting portico and going up to Levendale's front door, rang the bell. There was no light in any of the windows; all appeared to be in dead stillness in the house; somewhere, far off in the interior, he heard the bell tinkle. And suddenly, as he stood waiting and listening, he heard a voice that sounded close by him and became aware that there was a small trap or grille in the door, behind which he made out a face.

"Who is that?" whispered the voice.

"John Purdie—wanting to see Mr. Levendale," he answered promptly.

The door was just as promptly opened, and as Purdie stepped within was as quickly closed behind him. At the same instant the click of a switch heralded a flood of electric light, and he started to see a man standing at his side—a man who gave him a queer, deprecating smile, a man who was not and yet who was Levendale.

"Gracious me!" exclaimed Purdie, "it isn't—"

"Yes!" said Levendale, quietly. "But it is, though! All right, Purdie—come this way."

Purdie followed Levendale into a small room on the right of the hall—a room in which the remains of a cold,

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evidently impromptu supper lay on a table lighted by a shaded lamp. Two men had been partaking of that supper, but Levendale was alone. He gave his visitor another queer smile, and pointed, first to a chair and then to a decanter.

"Sit down—take a drink," he said. "This is a queer meeting! We haven't seen each other since—"

"Good God, man!" broke in Purdie, staring at his host. "What's it all mean? Are you—disguised?"

Levendale laughed—ruefully—and glanced at the mean garments which Mrs. Goldmark had spoken of.

"Necessity!" he said. "Had to! Ah!—I've been through some queer times—and in queer places. Look here—what do you know?"

"Know!" cried Purdie. "You want me to tell you all I know—in a sentence? Man!—it would take a month! What do you know? That's more like it!"

Levendale passed a hand across his forehead—there was a weariness in his gesture which showed his visitor that he was dead beat.

"Aye, just so!" he said. "But—tell me! has John Purvis come looking for his brother?"

"He has!" answered Purdie. "He's in London just now."

"Has he told about that diamond?—told the police?" demanded Levendale.

"He has!" repeated Purdie. "That's all known. Stephen Purvis—where is he?"

"Upstairs—asleep—dead tired out," said Levendale. "We both are! Night and day—day and night—I could fall on this floor and sleep—"

"You've been after that diamond?" suggested Purdie.

"That—and something else," said Levendale.

"Something else?" asked Purdie. "What then?"

"Eighty thousand pounds," answered Levendale.
"Just that!"

Purdie stood staring at him. Then he suddenly put a question.

"Do you know who murdered that old man in Praed Street?" he demanded. "That's what I'm after."

"No!" said Levendale, promptly. "I don't even know that he was murdered!" He, too, stared at his visitor for a moment; then "But I know more than a little about his being robbed," he added significantly.

Purdie shook his head. He was puzzled and mystified beyond measure.

"This is getting too deep for me!" he said. "You're the biggest mystery of all, Levendale. Look here!" he went on. "What are you going to do? This queer disappearance of yours—this being away—coming back without your beard and dressed like that!—aren't you going to explain? The police—"

"Yes!" said Levendale. "Ten o'clock this morning—the police-station. Be there—all of you—anybody—anybody who likes—I'm going to tell the police all I know. Purvis and I, we can't do any more—baffled, you understand! But now—go away, Purdie, and let me sleep—I'm dead done for!"

Within ten minutes of leaving them, Purdie was back with Lauriston and Melky Rubinstein, and motioning them away from Sussex Square.

"That's more extraordinary than the rest!" he said,

as they all moved off. "Levendale's there, in his own house, right enough! And he's shaved off his beard and mustache, and he's wearing tramp's clothes and he and Stephen Purvis have been looking night and day, for that confounded diamond, and for eighty thousand pounds! And—what's more, Levendale does not know who killed Daniel Multenius or that he was murdered! But, by George, sirs!" he added, as high above their heads the clock of St. James's Church struck one, "he knows something big!—and we've got to wait nine hours to hear it!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SECRET WORK

The inner room of the police-station, at ten o'clock that morning, was full of men. Purdie, coming there with Lauriston at five minutes before the hour, found Melky Rubinstein hanging about the outer door, and had only just time to warn his companion to keep silence as to their midnight discovery before Guyler and John Purvis drove up in one cab and Mr. Killick in another. Inside, Ayscough, refreshed by his breakfast and an hour's rest, was talking to the inspector and the man from New Scotland Yard—all these looked enquiringly at the group which presently crowded in on them.

"Any of you gentlemen got any fresh news?" demanded the inspector, as he ran his eye over the expectant faces. "No?—well, I suppose you're all wanting to know if we have?" He glanced at Ayscough, who was pointing out certain paragraphs in one of the morning newspapers to the Scotland Yard man. "The fact is," he continued, "there have been queer developments since last night—and I don't exactly know where we are! My own opinion is that we'd better wait a few hours before saying anything more definite—to my mind, these newspapers are getting hold of too much news—giving information to the enemy, as it were. I think you'd all better leave things to us, gentlemen—for a while." There was

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rather more than a polite intimation in this that the presence of so many visitors was not wanted—but John Purvis at once assumed a determined attitude.

“I want to know exactly what’s being done, and what’s going to be done, about my brother!” he said. “I’m entitled to that! That’s the job I came about—myself—as for the rest—”

“Your brother’s here!” said Purdie, who was standing by the window and keeping an eye on the street outside. “And Mr. Levendale with him—hadn’t you better have them straight in?” he went on, turning to the inspector. “They both look as if they’d things to tell.”

But Ayscough had already made for the door and within a moment was ushering in the new arrivals. And Purdie was quick to note that the Levendale who entered, a sheaf of morning papers in his hand, was a vastly different Levendale to the man he had seen nine hours before, dirty, unkempt, and worn out with weariness. The trim beard and mustache were hopelessly lost, and there were lines on Levendale’s face which they concealed, but Levendale himself was now smartly groomed and carefully dressed, and business-like, and it was with the air of a man who means business that he strode into the room and threw a calm nod to the officials.

“Now, Inspector,” he said, going straight to the desk, while Stephen Purvis turned to his brother. “I see from the papers that you’ve all been much exercised about Mr. Purvis and myself—it just shows how a couple of men can disappear and give some trouble before they’re found. But here we are!—and why we’re here is because we’re beaten—we took our own course in trying to

find our own property—and we're done! We can do no more—and so we come to you."

"You should have come here at first, Mr. Levendale," said the Inspector, a little sourly. "You'd have saved a lot of trouble—to yourselves as well as to us. But that's neither here nor there—I suppose you've something to tell us, Sir?"

"Before I tell you anything," replied Levendale, "I want to know something." He pointed to the morning papers which he had brought in. "These people," he said, "seem to have got hold of a lot of information—all got from you, of course. Now, we know what we're after—let's put it in a nutshell. A diamond—an orange-yellow diamond—worth eighty thousand pounds, the property of Mr. Stephen Purvis there. That's item one! But there's another. Eighty thousand pounds in bank-notes!—my property. Now—have any of you the least idea who's got the diamond and my money? Come!"

There was a moment's silence. Then Ayscough spoke.

"Not a definite idea, Mr. Levendale—as yet."

"Then I'll tell you," said Levendale. "A Chinese fellow—one Chang Li. He's got them—both! And Stephen Purvis and I have been after him for all the days and nights since we disappeared—and we're beaten! Now you'll have to take it up—and I'd better tell you the plain truth about what's no doubt seemed a queer business from the first. Half-an-hour's talk now will save hours of explanation later on. So listen to me, all of you—I already see two gentlemen here, Mr. Killick, and Mr. Guyler, who in a certain fashion, can corroborate some particulars that I shall give you. Keep us

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free from interruption, if you please, while I tell you my story."

Ayscough answered this request by going to the door and leaning against it, and Levendale took a chair by the side of the desk and looked round at an expectant audience.

"It's a queer and, in some respects, an involved story," he said, "but I shall contrive to make matters plain to you before I've finished. I shall have to go back a good many years—to a time when, as Mr. Killick there knows, I was a partner with Daniel Molteno in a jewellery business in the City. I left him, and went out to South Africa, where I engaged in diamond trading. I did unusually well in my various enterprises, and some years later I came back to London a very well-to-do man. Not long after my return, I met my former partner again. He had changed his name to Multenius, and was trading in Praed Street as a jeweller and pawnbroker. Now, I had no objection to carrying on a trade with certain business connections of mine at the Cape—and after some conversation with Multenius he and I arranged to buy and sell diamonds together here in London, and I at once paid over a sum of money to him as working capital. The transactions were carried out in his name. It was he, chiefly, who conducted them—he was as good and keen a judge of diamonds as any man I ever knew—and no one here was aware that I was concerned in them. I never went to his shop in Praed Street but twice—if it was absolutely necessary for him to see me, we met in the City, at a private office which I have there. Now you

understand the exact relations between Daniel Multenius and myself. We were partners—in secret.

“We come, then, to recent events. Early in this present autumn, we heard from Mr. Stephen Purvis, with whom I had had some transactions in South Africa, that he had become possessed of a rare and fine orange-yellow diamond and that he was sending it to us. It arrived at Multenius’s—Multenius brought it to me at my city office and we examined it, after which Multenius deposited it in his bank. We decided to buy it ourselves—I finding the money. We knew, from our messages from Stephen Purvis, that he would be in town on the 18th November, and we arranged everything for that date. That date, then, becomes of special importance—what happened at Multenius’s shop in Praed Street on the afternoon of November 18th, between half-past four and half-past five is, of course, the thing that really is of importance. Now, what did happen? I can tell you—same as regards one detail which is, perhaps, of more importance than the other details. Of that detail I can’t tell anything—but I can offer a good suggestion about it.

“Stephen Purvis was to call at Daniel Multenius’s shop in Praed Street between five o’clock and half-past on the afternoon of November 18th—to complete the sale of his diamond. About noon on that day, Daniel Multenius went to the City. He went to his bank and took the diamond away. He then proceeded to my office, where I handed him eighty thousand pounds in bank notes—notes of large amounts. With the diamond and these notes in his possession, Daniel Multenius went back:

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to Praed Street. I was to join him there shortly after five o'clock.

"Now we come to my movements. I lunched in the City, and afterwards went to a certain well-known bookseller's in Holborn, who had written to tell me that he had for sale a valuable book which he knew I wanted—I have been a collector of rare books ever since I came back to England. I spent an hour or so at the bookseller's shop. I bought the book which I had gone to see—paying a very heavy price for it. I carried it away in my hand, not wrapped up, and got into an omnibus which was going my way, and rode in it as far as the end of Praed Street. There I got out. And—in spite of what I said in my advertisement in the newspapers of the following morning,—I had the book in my hand when I left the omnibus. Why I pretended to have lost it, why I inserted that advertisement in the papers, I shall tell you presently—that was all part of a game which was forced upon me.

"It was, as near as I can remember, past five o'clock when I turned along Praed Street. The darkness was coming on, and there was a slight rain falling, and a tendency to fog. However, I noticed something—I am naturally very quick of observation. As I passed the end of the street which goes round the back of the Grand Junction Canal basin, the street called Iron Gate Wharf, I saw turn into it, walking very quickly, a Chinaman whom I knew to be one of the two Chinese medical students to whom Daniel Multenius had let a furnished house in Maida Vale. He had his back to me—I did not know which of the two he was. I thought nothing of the mat-

ter, and went on. In another minute I was at the pawnshop. I opened the door, walked in, and went straight to the little parlour—I had been there just twice before when Daniel Multenius was alone, and so I knew my way. I went, I say, straight through—and in the parlour doorway ran into Stephen Purvis.

“Purvis was excited—trembling, big fellow though he is, do you see? He will bear me out as to what was said—and done. Without a word, he turned and pointed to where Daniel Multenius was lying across the floor—dead. ‘I haven’t been here a minute!’ said Purvis. ‘I came in—found him, like that! There’s nobody here. For God’s sake, where’s my diamond?’

“Now, I was quick to think. I formed an impression within five seconds. That Chinaman had called—found the old man lying in a fit, or possibly dead—had seen, as was likely, the diamond on the table in the parlour, the wad of bank-notes lying near, had grabbed the lot—and gone away. It was a theory—and I am confident yet that it was the correct one. And I tell you plainly that my concern from that instant was not with Daniel Multenius, but with the Chinaman! I thought and acted like lightning. First, I hastily examined Multenius, felt in his pockets, found that there was nothing there that I wanted and that he was dead. Then I remembered that on a previous visit of mine he had let me out of his house by a door at the rear which communicated with a narrow passage running into Market Street, and without a second’s delay, I seized Purvis by the arm and hurried him out. It was dark enough in that passage—there was not a soul about—we crossed Market Street,

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turned to the right, and were in Oxford and Cambridge Terrace before we paused. My instinct told me that the right thing to do was to get away from that parlour. And it was not until we were quite away from it that I realized that I had left my book behind me!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BAFFLED

Levendale paused at this point of his story, and looked round the circle of attentive faces. He was quick to notice that two men were watching him with particularly close attention—one was Ayscough, the other, the old solicitor. And as he resumed his account he glanced meaningly at Mr. Killick.

“I daresay some of you would like to question me—and Stephen Purvis, too—on what I’ve already told you?” he said. “You’re welcome to ask any questions you like—any of you—when I’ve done. But—let me finish—for then perhaps you’ll fully understand what we were at.

“Purvis and I walked up and down in Oxford and Cambridge Terrace for some time—discussing the situation. The more I considered the matter, the more I was certain that my first theory was right—the Chinaman had got the diamond and the banknotes. I was aware of these two Chinamen as tenants of Multenius’s furnished house—as a matter of fact, I had been present, at the shop in Praed Street, on one of my two visits there when they concluded their arrangements with him. What I now thought was this—one of them had called on the old man to do some business, or to pay the rent, and had found him in a fit, or dead, as the result of one, had

seen the diamond and the money on the table, placed there in readiness for Purvis's coming, and had possessed himself of both and made off. Purvis agreed with me. And—both Purvis and myself are well acquainted with the characteristic peculiarities, and idiosyncrasies of Chinamen!—we knew with what we had to deal. Therefore we knew what we had to do. We wanted the diamond and my money. And since we were uncomfortably aware of the craft and subtlety of the thief who'd got both we knew we should have to use craft ourselves—and of no common sort. Therefore we decided that the very last thing we should think of would be an immediate appeal to the police.

“Now, you police officials may, nay, will!—say that we ought to have gone straight to you, especially as this was a case of murder. But we knew nothing about it being a case of murder. We had seen no signs of violence on the old man—I knew him to be very feeble, and I believed he had been suddenly struck over by paralysis, or something of that sort. I reckoned matters up, carefully. It was plain that Daniel Multenius had been left alone in house and shop—that his granddaughter was out on some errand or other. Therefore, no one knew of the diamond and the money. We did not want any one to know. If we had gone to the police and told our tale, the news would have spread, and would certainly have reached the Chinaman's ears. We knew well enough that if we were to get our property back the thief must not be alarmed—there must be nothing in the newspapers next morning. The Chinaman must not know that the real owners of the diamond and the banknotes suspected

him—he must not know that information about his booty was likely to be given to the police. He must be left to believe—for some hours at any rate—that what he had possessed himself of was the property of a dead man who could not tell anything.

“But there was my book in that dead man’s parlour! It was impossible to go back and fetch it. It was equally impossible that it should not attract attention. Daniel Multenius’s granddaughter, whom I believed to be a very sharp young woman, would notice it, and would know that it had come into the place during her absence. I thought hard over that problem—and finally I drafted an advertisement and sent it off to an agency with instructions to insert it in every morning newspaper in London next day. Why? Because I wanted to draw a red herring across the trail!—I wanted, for the time being, to set up a theory that some man or other had found that book in the omnibus, had called in at Multenius’s to sell or pawn it, had found the old man alone, and had assaulted and robbed him. All this was with a view to hoodwinking the Chinaman. Anything must be done, anything!—to keep him ignorant that Purvis and I knew the real truth.

“But—what did we intend to do? I tell you, not being aware that old Daniel Multenius had met his death by violence, we did not give one second’s thought to that aspect and side of the affair—we concentrated on the recovery of our property. I knew the house in which these Chinese lived. That evening, Purvis and I went there. We have both been accustomed, in our time, to various secret dealings and manœuvres, and we entered the

grounds of that house without any one being the wiser. It did not take long to convince us that the house was empty. It remained empty that night—Purvis kept guard over it, in an outhouse in the garden. No one either entered or left it between our going to it and Purvis coming away from it next morning—he stayed there, watching until it was time to keep an appointment with me in Hyde Park. Before I met him, I had been called upon by Detective Ayscough, Mr. Rubinstein, and Mr. Lauriston—they know what I said to them. I could not at that time say anything else—I had my own concerns to think of.

“When Purvis and I met we had another consultation, and we determined, in view of all the revelations which had come out and had been published in the papers, that the suspicion cast on young Mr. Lauriston was the very best thing that could happen for us; it would reassure our Chinaman. And we made up our minds that the house in Maida Vale would not be found untenanted that night, and we arranged to meet there at eleven o’clock. We felt so sure that our man would have read all the news in the papers, and would feel safe, and that we should find him. But, mark you, we had no idea as to which of the two Chinamen it was that we wanted. Of one fact, however, we were certain—whichever it was that I had seen slip round the corner of Iron Gate Wharf the previous day, whether it was Chang Li or Chen Li, he would have kept his secret to himself! The thing was—to get into that house; to get into conversation with both; to decide which was the guilty man, and then—to

take our own course. We knew what to do—and we went fully prepared.

“Now we come to this—our second visit to the house in Maida Vale. To be exact, it was between eleven and twelve on the second night after the disappearance of the diamond. As on the previous night, we gained access to the garden by the door at the back—that, on each occasion, was unfastened, while the gate giving access to the road in Maida Vale was securely locked. And, as on the previous night, we quickly found that up to then at any rate, the house was empty. But not so the garden! While I was looking round the further side of the house, Purvis took a careful look round the garden. And presently he came to me and drew away to the asphalted path which runs from the front gate to the front door. The moon had risen above the houses and trees—and in its light he pointed to bloodstains. It did not take a second look, gentlemen, to see that they were recent—in fact, fresh. Somebody had been murdered in that garden not many minutes—literally, minutes!—before our arrival. And within two minutes more we found the murdered man lying behind some shrubbery on the left of the path. I knew him for the younger of the two Chinese—the man called Chen Li.

“This discovery, of course, made us aware that we were now face to face with a new development. We were not long in arriving at a conclusion about that. Chang Li had found out that his friend had become possessed of these valuable—he might have discovered the matter of the diamond, or of the bank-notes or both—how was

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immaterial. But we were convinced, putting everything together, that he had made this discovery, had probably laid in wait for Chen Li as he returned home that night, had run a knife into him as he went up the garden, had dragged the body into the shrubbery, possessed himself of the loot, and made off. And now we were face to face with what was going, as we knew, to be the stiffest part of our work—the finding of Chang Li. We set to work on that without a moment's delay.

“I have told you that Purvis and I have a pretty accurate knowledge of Chinamen; we have both had deep and intimate experience of them and their ways. I, personally, know a good deal of the Chinese Colony in London: I have done business with Chinamen, both in London and South Africa, for years. I had a good idea of what Chang Li's procedure would be. He would hide—if need be, for months, until the first heat of the hue and cry which he knew would be sure to be raised, would have cooled down. There are several underground warrens—so to speak—in the East End, in which he could go to earth, comfortably and safely, until there was a chance of slipping out of the country unobserved. I know already of some of them. I would get to know of others.

“Purvis and I got on that track—such as it was, at once. We went along to the East End there and then—before morning I had shaved off my beard and mustache, disguised myself in old clothes, and was beginning my work. First thing next morning I did two things—one was to cause a telegram to be sent from Spring Street to my butler explaining my probable absence; the other to

secretly warn the Bank of England about the bank-notes. But I had no expectation that Chang Li would try to negotiate those—all his energies, I knew, would be concentrated on the diamond. Nevertheless, he might try—and would, if he tried—succeed—in changing one note, and it was as well to take that precaution.

“Now then, next day, Purvis and I being, in our different ways, at work in the East End, we heard the news about the Praed Street tradesman, Parslett. That seemed to me remarkable proof of my theory. As the successive editions of the newspapers came out during that day, and next day, we learnt all about the Parslett affair. I saw through it at once. Parslett, being next-door neighbour to Daniel Multenius, had probably seen Chen Li—whom we now believed to have been the actual thief—slip away from Multenius’s door, and, when the news of Daniels death came out, had put two and two together, and, knowing where the Chinamen lived, had gone to the house in Maida Vale to blackmail them. I guessed what had happened then—Parslett, to quieten him for the moment, had been put off with fifty pounds in gold, and promised more—and he had also been skilfully poisoned in such a fashion that he would get safely away from the premises but die before he got home. And when he was safe away, Chang Li had murdered Chen Li, and made off. So—as I still think—all our theories were correct, and the only thing to do was to find Chang.”

But here Levendale paused, glanced at Stephen Purvis, and spread out his hands with a gesture which indicated failure and disappointment. His glance moved from Stephen Purvis to the police officials.

"All no good!" he exclaimed. "It's useless to deny it. I have been in every Chinese den and haunt in East London—I'm certain that Chang Li is nowhere down there. I have spent money like water—employed Chinese and Easterns on whom I could depend—there isn't a trace of him! And so—we gave up last night. Purvis and I—baffled. We've come to you police people—"

"You should have done that before, Mr. Levendale," said the Inspector severely. "You haven't given us much credit, I think, and if you'd told all this at first—"

Before the Inspector could say more, a constable tapped at the door and put his head into the room. His eyes sought Ayscough.

"There's a young gentleman—foreigner—asking for you, Mr. Ayscough," he said. "Wants to see you at once—name of Mr. Yada."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

YADA TAKES CHARGE

Ayscough had only time to give a warning look and a word to the others before Mr. Mori Yada was ushered in. Every eye was turned on him as he entered—some of the men present looking at him with wonder, some with curiosity, two, at any rate—Levendale and Stephen Purvis—with doubt. But Yada himself was to all outward appearance utterly indifferent to the glances thrown in his direction: it seemed to John Purdie, who was remembering all he had heard the night before, that the young Japanese medical student was a singularly cool and self-possessed hand. Yada, indeed, might have been walking in on an assemblage of personal friends, specially gathered together in his honour. Melky Rubinstein, who was also watching him closely, noticed at once that he had evidently made a very careful toilet that morning. Yada's dark overcoat, thrown negligently open, revealed a smart grey lounge suit; in one gloved hand he carried a new bowler hat, in the other a carefully rolled umbrella. He looked as prosperous and as severely in mode as if no mysteries and underground affairs had power to touch him, and the ready smile with which he greeted Ayscough was ingenuous and candid enough to disarm the most suspicious.

"Good morning, Mr. Detective," he began, as he

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crossed the threshold and looked first at Ayscough and then at the ring of attentive faces. "I want to speak to you on that little affair of last night, you know. I suppose you are discussing it with these gentlemen? Well, perhaps I can now give you some information that will be useful."

"Glad to hear anything, Mr. Yada," said Ayscough, who was striving hard to conceal his surprise. "Anything that you can tell us. You've heard something during the night, then?"

Yada laughed pleasantly, showing his white teeth. He dropped into the chair which Ayscough pushed forward, and slowly drew off his gloves.

"I assured myself of something last night—after you left me," he said, with a knowing look. "I used your card to advantage, Mr. Detective. I went to the mortuary."

Ayscough contrived to signal to the Inspector to leave the talking to him. He put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, assumed an easy attitude as he leaned against the door, and looked speculatively at the new comer.

"Aye?—and what made you do that now, Mr. Yada?" he asked, half-carelessly. "A bit of curiosity, eh?"

"Not idle curiosity, Mr. Detective," replied Yada. "I wanted to know, to make certain, which of the two Chinamen it really was who was there—dead. I saw him. Now I know. Chen Li!"

"Well?" said Ayscough.

Yada suddenly twisted round in his chair, and slowly glanced at the listening men on either side of the desk.

They were cool, bold, half-insolent eyes which received face after face, showing no recognition of any until they encountered Melky Rubinstein's watchful countenance. And to Melky, Yada accorded a slight nod—and turned to Ayscough again.

"Which," he asked calmly, "which of these gentlemen is the owner of the diamond? Which is the one who has lost eighty thousand pounds in bank-notes? That is what I want to know before I say more."

In the silence which followed upon Ayscough's obvious doubt about answering this direct question, Levendale let out a sharp, half-irritable exclamation:

"In God's name!" he said, "who is this young man? What does he know about the diamond and the money?"

Yada turned and faced his questioner—and suddenly smiling, thrust his hand in his breast pocket and drew out a card-case. With a polite bow he handed a card in Levendale's direction.

"Permit me, sir," he said suavely. "My card. As for the rest, perhaps Mr. Detective here will tell you."

"It's this way, you see, Mr. Levendale," remarked Ayscough. "Acting on information received from Dr. Pittery, one of the junior house-surgeons at University College Hospital, who told me that Mr. Yada was a fellow-student of those two Chinese, and a bit of a friend of theirs, I called on Mr. Yada last night to make enquiries. And of course I had to tell him about the missing property—though to be sure, that's news that's common to everybody now—through the papers. And—what else have you to tell, Mr. Yada?"

But Yada was watching Levendale—who, on his part,

was just as narrowly watching Yada. The other men in the room watched these two—recognizing, as if by instinct, that from that moment matters lay between Levendale and Yada, and not between Yada and Ayscough. They were mutually inspecting and appraising each other, and in spite of their impassive faces, it was plain that each was wondering about his next move.

It was Levendale who spoke first—spoke as if he and the young Japanese were the only people in the room, as if nothing else mattered. He bent forward to Yada.

“How much do you know?” he demanded.

Yada showed his white teeth again.

“A plain—and a wide question, Mr. Levendale!” he answered, with a laugh. “I see that you are anxious to enlist my services. Evidently, you believe that I do know something. But—you are not the owner of the diamond! Which of these gentlemen is?”

Levendale made a half impatient gesture towards Stephen Purvis, who nodded at Yada but remained silent.

“He is!” said Levendale, testily. “But you—can do your talking to me. Again—how much do you know in this matter?”

“Enough to make it worth your while to negotiate with me,” answered Yada. “Is that as plain as your question?”

“It’s what I expected,” said Levendale. “You want to sell your knowledge.”

“Well?” assented Yada, “I am very sure you are willing to purchase.”

Once more that duel of the eyes—and to John Purdie,

who prided himself on being a judge of expressions, it was evident that the younger man was more than the equal of the older. It was Levendale who gave way—and when he took his eyes off Yada, it was to turn to Stephen Purvis.

Stephen Purvis nodded his head once more—and growled a little.

“Make terms with him!” he muttered. “Case of have to, I reckon!”

Levendale turned once more to the Japanese, who smiled on him.

“Look you here, Mr. Yada,” said Levendale, “I don’t know who you are beyond what I’m told—your card tells me nothing except that you live—lodge, I suppose—in Gower Street. You’ve got mixed up in this, somehow, and you’ve got knowledge to dispose of. Now, I don’t buy unless I know first what it is I’m buying. So—let’s know what you’ve got to sell?”

Yada swept the room with a glance.

“Before these gentlemen?” he asked. “In open market, eh?”

“They’re all either police, or detectives, or concerned,” retorted Levendale. “There’s no secret. I repeat—what have you got to sell? Specify it!”

Yada lifted his hands and began to check off points on the tips of his fingers.

“Three items, then, Mr. Levendale,” he replied cheerfully. “First—the knowledge of who has got the diamond and the money. Second—the knowledge of where he is at this moment, and will be for some hours. Third

—the knowledge of how you can successfully take him and recover your property. Three good, saleable items, I think—yes?”

Purdie watched carefully for some sign of greed or avarice in the informer's wily countenance. To his surprise, he saw none. Instead, Yada assumed an almost sanctimonious air. He seemed to consider matters—though his answer was speedy.

“I don't want to profit—unduly—by this affair,” he said. “At the same time, from all I've heard, I'm rendering you and your friend a very important service, and I think it only fair that I should be remunerated. Give me something towards the expenses of my medical education, Mr. Levendale: give me five hundred pounds.”

With the briefest exchange of glances with Stephen Purvis, Levendale pulled out a cheque-book, dashed off a cash cheque, and handed it over to the Japanese, who slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

“Now—your information!” said Levendale.

“To be sure,” replied Yada. “Very well. Chang Li has the diamond and the money. And he is at this moment where he has been for some days, in hiding. He is in a secret room at a place called Pilmansey's Tea Rooms, in Tottenham Court Road—a place much frequented by medical students from our college. The fact of the case is, Mr. Policeman, and the rest of you generally, there is a secret opium den at Pilmansey's, though nobody knows of it but a few frequenters. And there!—there you will find Chang Li.”

“You've seen him there?” demanded Levendale.

“I saw him there during last night—I know him to be

there—he will be there, either until you take him, or until his arrangements are made for getting out of this country,” answered Yada.

Levendale jumped up, as if for instant action. But the Inspector quietly tapped him on the elbow.

“He promised to tell you how to take him, Mr. Levendale,” he said. “Let’s know all we can—we shall have to be in with you on this, you know.”

“Mr. Police-Inspector is right,” said Yada. “You will have to conduct what you call a raid. Now, do precisely what I tell you to do. Pilmansey’s is an old-fashioned place, a very old house as regards its architecture, on the right-hand side of Tottenham Court Road. Go there today—this mid-day—a little before one—when there are always plenty of customers. Go with plenty of your plain-clothes men, like Mr. Ayscough there. Drop in, don’t you see, as if you were customers—let there be plenty of you, I repeat. There are two Pilmanseys—men—middle-aged, sly, smooth, crafty men. When you are all there, take your own lines—close the place, the doors, if you like—but get hold of the Pilmansey men, tell them you are police, insist on being taken to the top floor and shown their opium den. They will object, they will lie, they will resist—you will use your own methods. But—in that opium den you will find Chang Li—and your property!”

He had been drawing on his gloves as he spoke, and now, picking up his hat and umbrella, Yada bowed politely to the circle and moved to the door.

“You will excuse me, now?” he said. “I have an important lecture at the medical school which I must not

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miss. I shall be at Pilmansey's, myself, a little before one—please oblige me by not taking any notice of me. I do not want to figure—actively—in your business.”

Then he was gone—and the rest of them were so deeply taken with the news which he had communicated that no one noticed that just before Yada fastened his last glove-button, Melky Rubinstein slipped from his corner and glided quietly out of the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

PILMANSEY'S TEA ROOMS

Two hours later, it being then a quarter-to-one o'clock, Purdie and Lauriston got out of a taxi-cab at the north-end of Tottenham Court Road and walked down the right-hand side of that busy thoroughfare, keeping apparently careless but really vigilant eyes open for a first glimpse of the appointed rendezvous. But Pilmansey's Tea Rooms required little searching out. In the midst of the big modern warehouses, chiefly given up to furniture and upholstery, there stood at that time a block of old property which was ancient even for London. The buildings were plainly early eighteenth century: old red-brick erections with narrow windows in the fronts and dormer windows in the high, sloping roofs. Some of them were already doomed to immediate dismantlement; the tenants had cleared out, there were hoardings raised to protect passers-by from falling masonry, and bills and posters on the threatened walls announced that during the rebuilding, business would be carried on as usual at some other specified address. But Pilmansey's, so far, remained untouched, and the two searchers saw that customers were going in and out, all unaware that before evening their favourite resort for a light mid-day meal would attain a fame and notoriety not at all promised by its very ordinary and commonplace exterior.

“An excellent example of the truth of the old saying that you should never judge by appearances, Andie, my man!” remarked Purdie, as they took a quick view of the place. “Who’d imagine that crime, dark secrets, and all the rest of it lies concealed behind this?—behind the promise of tea and muffins, milk and buns! It’s a queer world, this London!—you never know what lies behind any single bit of the whole microcosm. But let’s see what’s to be seen inside.”

The first thing to be seen inside the ground floor room into which they stepped was the man from New Scotland Yard, who, in company with another very ordinary-looking individual was seated at a little table just inside the entrance, leisurely consuming coffee and beef sandwiches. He glanced at the two men as if he had never seen them in his life, and they, preserving equally stolid expressions with credit if not with the detective’s ready and trained ability, passed further on—only to recognize Levendale and Stephen Purvis, who had found accommodation in a quiet corner half-way down the room. They, too, showed no signs of recognition, and Purdie, passing by them, steered his companion to an unoccupied table and bade him be seated.

“Let’s get our bearings,” he whispered as they dropped into their seats. “Looks as innocent and commonplace within as it appeared without, Andie. But use your eyes—it ought to make good copy for you, this.”

Lauriston glanced about him. The room in which they sat was a long, low-ceiling apartment, extending from the street door to a sort of bar-counter at the rear, beyond which was a smaller room that was evidently given

up to store and serving purposes. On the counter were set out provisions—rounds of beef, hams, tongues, bread, cakes, confectionery; behind it stood two men whom the watchers at once set down as the proprietors. Young women, neatly gowned in black and wearing white caps and aprons, flitted to and fro between the counter and the customers. As for the customers they were of both sexes, and the larger proportion of them young. There was apparently no objection to smoking at Pilmansey's—a huge cloud of blue smoke ascended from many cigarettes, and the scent of Turkish tobacco mingled with the fragrance of freshly-ground coffee. It was plain that Pilmansey's was the sort of place wherein you could get a good sandwich, good tea or coffee, smoke a cigarette or two, and idle away an hour in light chatter with your friends between your morning and afternoon labours.

But Lauriston's attention was mainly directed to the two men who stood behind the bar-counter, superintending and directing their neat assistants. Sly, smooth, crafty men—so they had been described by Mr. Mori Yada: Lauriston's opinion coincided with that of the Japanese, on first, outer evidence and impression. They were middle-aged, plump men who might be, and probably were, twins, favouring mutton chop whiskers, and good linen and black neckcloths—they might have been strong, highly-respectable butlers. Each had his coat off; each wore a spotless linen apron; each wielded carving knives and forks; each was busy in carving plates of ham or tongue or beef; each contrived, while thus engaged, to keep his sharp, beady eyes on the doings in the room in front of the counter. Evidently a well-to-do,

old-established business, this, and highly prosperous men who owned it: Lauriston wondered that they should run any risks by hiding away a secret opium den somewhere on their ancient premises.

In the midst of their reflections one of the waitresses came to the table at which the two friends sat: Lauriston quicker of wit than Purdie in such matters immediately ordered coffee and sandwiches and until they came, lighted a cigarette and pretended to be at ease, though he was inwardly highly excited.

"It's as if one were waiting for an explosion to take place!" he muttered to Purdie. "Even now I don't know what's going to happen."

"Here's Ayscough, anyway," said Purdie. "He looks as if nothing was about to happen."

Ayscough, another man with him, was making his way unconcernedly down the shop. He passed the man from New Scotland Yard without so much as a wink: he ignored Levendale and Stephen Purvis; he stared blankly at Purdie and Lauriston, and led his companion to two vacant seats near the counter. And they had only just dropped into them when in came Mr. Killick, with John Purvis and Guyler and slipped quietly into seats in the middle of the room. Here then, said Lauriston to himself, were eleven men, all in a secret—and there were doubtless others amongst the company whom he did not know.

"But where's Melky Rubinstein?" he whispered suddenly. "I should have thought he'd have turned up—he's been so keen on finding things out."

"There's time enough yet," answered Purdie. "It's

not one. I don't see the Jap, either. But—here's the Inspector—done up in plain clothes."

The Inspector came in with a man whom neither Purdie nor Lauriston had ever seen before—a quietly but well-dressed man about whom there was a distinct air of authority. They walked down the room to a table near the counter, ordered coffee and lighted cigarettes—and the two young Scotsmen, watching them closely, saw that they took a careful look round as if to ascertain the strength of their forces. And suddenly, as Lauriston was eating his second sandwich, the Inspector rose, quietly walked to the counter and bending over it, spoke to one of the white-aproned men behind.

"The game's begun!" whispered Lauriston. "Look!"

But Purdie's eyes were already fixed on the Pilmanseys, whom he recognized as important actors in the drama about to be played. One of them slightly taller, slightly greyer than the other, was leaning forward to the Inspector, and was evidently amazed at what was being said to him, for he started, glanced questioningly at his visitor, exchanged a hurried word or two with him and then turned to his brother. A second later, both men laid down their great knives and forks, left their counter, and beckoned the Inspector to follow them into a room at the rear of the shop. And the Inspector in his turn, beckoned Ayscough with a mere glance, and Ayscough in his, made an inviting movement to the rest of the party.

"Come on!" said Purdie. "Let's hear what's happening."

The proprietors of the tea-rooms had led the Inspec-

tor and the man who was with him into what was evidently a private room—and when Lauriston and Purdie reached the door they were standing on the hearth rug, side by side, each in a very evident state of amazement, staring at a document which the Inspector was displaying to them. They looked up from it to glance with annoyance, at the other men who came quietly and expectantly crowding into the room.

“More of your people?” asked the elder man, querulously. “Look here, you know!—we don’t see the need for all this fuss, not for your interrupting our business in this way! One or two of you, surely, would have been enough without bringing a troop of people on to our premises—all this is unnecessary!”

“You’ll allow us to be the best judge of what’s necessary and what isn’t, Mr. Pilmansey,” retorted the Inspector. “There’ll be no fuss, no bother—needn’t be, anyway, if you tell us what we want to know, and don’t oppose us in what we’ve got power to do. Here’s a warrant—granted on certain information—to search your premises. If you’ll let us do that quietly.”

“But for what reason?” demanded the younger man. “Our premises, indeed! Been established here a good hundred years, and never a word against us. What do you want to search for?”

“I’ll tell you that at once,” answered the Inspector. “We want a young Chinaman, one Chang Li, who, we are informed, is concealed here, and has valuable stolen property on him. Now, then, do you know anything about him? Is he here?”

The two men exchanged glances. For a moment they

remained silent—then the elder man spoke, running his eye over the expectant faces watching him.

“Before I say any more,” he answered, “I should just like to know where you got your information from?”

“No!” replied the Inspector, firmly. “I shan’t tell you. But I’ll tell you this much—this Chang Li is wanted on a very serious charge as it is, and we may charge him with something much more serious. We’ve positive information that he’s here—and I’m only giving you sound advice when I say that if he is here, you’ll do well to show us where he is. Now, come, Mr. Pilmansey, is he here?”

The elder Pilmansey shook his head—but the shake was more one of doubt than of denial.

“I can’t say,” he answered. “He might be.”

“What’s that mean?” demanded the Inspector. “Might be? Surely you know who’s in your own house!”

“No!” said the elder man, “I can’t say. It’s this way—we’ve a certain number of foreigners come here. There are few—just a few—Chinese and Japanese—medical students, you know. Now, some time ago—a couple of years ago—some of them asked us if we couldn’t let them have three or four rooms at the top of the house in which to start a sort of little club of their own, so that they could have a place for their meetings, you understand. They were all quiet, very respectable young fellows—so we did. They have the top floor of this house. They furnished and fitted it up themselves. There’s a separate entrance—at the side of the shop. Each of them has a latch-key of his

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own. So they can go in and out as they like—they never bother us. But, as a matter of fact, there are only four or five of them who are members now—the others have all left. That's the real truth—and I tell you I don't know if Mr. Chang Li might be up there or not. We know nothing about what they do in their rooms—they're only our tenants."

"Let me ask you one question," said the Inspector. "Have either of you ever been in those rooms since you let them to these people?"

"No!" answered the elder man. "Neither of us—at any time!"

"Then," commanded the Inspector, "I'll thank you to come up with us to them—now!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CHANG LI

Not without some grumbling as to waste of time and interference with business, the Pilmansey brothers led the way to a side door which opened into a passage that ran along the side of the shop and from whence a staircase rose to the upper regions of the house. The elder pointed, significantly, to the street door at the end.

"You'll take notice that these young fellows I told you of get to the rooms we let them through that?" he observed. "That door's always locked—they all have latch-keys to it. They never come through the shop—we've nothing to do with them, and we don't know anything about whatever they may do in their rooms—all we're concerned with is that they pay their rent and behave themselves. And quiet enough they've always been—we've had no reason to complain."

"And, as they all have latch-keys, I suppose they can get into the place at any hour of the day—or night?" suggested the Inspector. "There's no bar against them coming here at night?"

"They can come in—and go out—whenever they please," answered the elder man. "I tell you we've nothing to do with them—except as their landlords."

"Where do you live—yourselves?" asked the Inspector. "On these premises?"

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"No, we don't," replied the younger brother, who, of the two, had showed the keenest, if most silent, resentment at the police proceedings. "We live—elsewhere. This establishment is opened at eight in the morning, and closed at seven in the evening. We're never here after seven—either of us."

"So that you never see anything of these foreigners at night-time?" asked the Inspector. "Don't know what they do, I suppose?"

"We never see anything of 'em at any time," said the elder brother. "As you see, this passage and staircase is outside the shop. We know nothing whatever about them beyond what I've told you."

"Well—take us up, and we'll see what we can find out," commanded the Inspector. "We're going to examine those rooms, Mr. Pilmansey, so we'll get it done at once."

The intervening rooms between the lower and the top floors of the old house appeared to be given up to stores—the open doors revealed casks, cases, barrels, piles of biscuit and confectionery boxes—nothing to conceal there, decided the lynx-eyed men who trooped up the dingy stairs after the grumbling proprietors. But the door on the top floor was closed—and when Ayscough turned its handle he found it to be locked from within.

"They've keys of their own for that, too," remarked the younger Pilmansey. "I don't see how you're going to get in, if there's nobody inside."

"We're going in there whether there's anybody or not," said the Inspector. "Knock, Ayscough!—knock loudly!"

The group of men gathered behind the leaders, and filling the whole of the lobby outside the closed door, waited, expectant and excited, in the silence which followed on Ayscough's loud beating on the upper panel. A couple of minutes went by: the detective knocked again, more insistently. And suddenly, and silently, the door was opened—first, an inch or two, then a little wider, and as Ayscough slipped a stoutly booted foot inside the crack a yellow face, lighted by a pair of narrow-slitted dark eyes, looked out—and immediately vanished.

“In with you!” said the Inspector. “Careful, now!”

Ayscough pushed the door open and walked in, the rest crowding on his heels. And Purdie, who was one of the foremost to enter, was immediately cognizant of two distinct odours—one, the scent of fragrant tea, the other of a certain heavy, narcotic something which presently overpowered the fragrance of the tea and left an acid and bitter taste.

“Opium,” he whispered to Lauriston, who was close at his elbow. “Opium! Smell it!”

But Lauriston was more eyes than nose just then. He, like the rest of his companions, was staring at the scene on which they had entered. The room was of a good size—evidently, from its sloping ceilings, part of the attic story of the old house. The walls were hung with soft, clinging, Oriental draperies and curtains; a few easy chairs of wickerwork, a few small tables of like make, were disposed here and there: there was an abundance of rugs and cushions: in one corner a gas-stove was alight, and on it stood a kettle, singing merrily.

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The young man who had opened the door had retreated towards this stove; Purdie noticed that in one hand he held a small tea-pot. And in the left-hand corner, bent over a little table, and absorbed in their game, sat two other young men, correctly attired in English clothes, but obviously Chinese from their eyebrows to their toes, playing chess.

The holder of the tea-pot cast a quick glance at the disturbance of this peaceful scene, and set down his tea-pot; the chess-players looked up for one second, showed not the faintest sign of perturbation—and looked down again. Then the man of the tea-pot spoke—one word.

“Yes?” he said.

“The fact is, Mister,” said the elder Pilmansey, “these are police-officers. They want one of your friends—Mr. Chang Li.”

The three occupants of the room appeared to pay no attention. The chess-players went on playing; the other man reached for a canister, and mechanically emptied tea out of it into his pot.

“Shut and lock that door, Ayscough,” said the Inspector. “Let somebody stand by it. Now,” he continued, turning to the three Chinese, “is one of you gentlemen Mr. Chang Li?”

“No!” replied one of the chess-players. “Not one of us!”

“Is he here?” demanded the Inspector. Then seeing that he was to be met by Oriental impassivity, he turned to the Pilmanseys. “What other rooms are there here?” he asked.

“Two,” answered the elder brother, pointing to the

curtains at the rear of the room. "One there—the other there. Behind those hangings—two smaller rooms."

The Inspector strode forward and tore the curtains aside. He flung open the first of the doors—and started back, catching his breath.

"Phew!" he said.

The heavy, narcotic odour which Purdie had noticed at once on entering the rooms came afresh, out of the newly-opened door, in a thick wave. And as the rest of them crowded after the Inspector, they saw why. This was a small room, hung like the first one with curiously-figured curtains, and lighted only by a sky-light, over which a square of blue stuff had been draped. In the subdued life they saw that there was nothing in that room but a lounge well fitted with soft cushions and pillows—and on it, his spare figure wrapped in a loose gown, lay a young Chinaman, who, as the foremost advanced upon him, blinked in their wondering faces out of eyes the pupils of which were still contracted. Near him lay an opium pipe—close by, on a tiny stand, the materials for more consumption of the drug.

The man who had accompanied the Inspector in his entrance to the tea-shop strode forward and seized the recumbent figure by the shoulder, shaking him gently.

"Now then!" he said, sharply, "wake up, my man! Are you Chang Li?"

The glazed eyes lifted themselves a little wonderingly; the dry lips moved.

"Yes," he muttered. "Chang Li—yes. You want me?"

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"How long have you been here?" demanded the questioner.

"How long—yes? Oh—I don't know. What do you want?" asked Chang Li. "I don't know you."

The tea-maker thrust his head inside the room.

"He can't tell you anything," he said, with a grin. "He has been—what you call on the break-out—with opium—ever so many days. He has—attacks that way. Takes a fit of it—just as some of your people take to the drink. He's coming out of it, now—and he'll be very, very unhappy tomorrow."

The Inspector twisted round on the informant.

"Look here!" he said. "Do you know how long he's been here—stupifying himself? Is it a day—or days?"

One of the chess-players lifted a stolid face.

"He has been here—like that—several days," he said. "It's useless trying to do anything with him when he takes the fit—the craving, you understand?—into his head. If you want any information out of him, you'd better call again in a few hours."

"Do you mean to tell me he's been here—like that—several days?" demanded the Inspector.

"The young man with the tea-pot grinned again.

"He's never been at a class at the medical school since the 17th," he announced. "I know that—he's in some classes with me. He's been here—all the time since then."

The Inspector turned sharply on Ayscough.

"The 17th!" he exclaimed. "And that affair was on the 18th! Then—"

Chang Li was fumbling in a pocket of his gown. He found something there, raised a hand to his lips, swallowed something. And in a few seconds, as his eyes grew brighter, he turned a suspicious and sullen glance on the group which stood watching him.

"What do you want?" he growled. "Who are you?"

"We want some information from you," said the Inspector. "When did you last see your brother, or friend, or whatever he is—Chen Li?"

Chang Li shook his head—it was obvious that he had no clear recollection.

"Don't know," he answered. "Perhaps just now—perhaps tomorrow—perhaps not for a long time."

"When were you last at home—in Maida Vale?" asked the Inspector.

But Chang Li gave no answer to that beyond a frown, and it was evident that as his wits cleared his temper was becoming ugly. He began to look round with more intelligence, scanning one face after another with growing dislike, and presently he muttered certain observations to himself which, though not in English, sounded anything but complimentary to those who watched him. And Ayscough suddenly turned to the superior officials.

"If this man's been here ever since the 17th," he said, "he can't have had anything to do with the affairs in Praed Street and Maida Vale! Supposing, now—I'm only supposing—that young Jap's been lying all the time?" He turned again—this time on the two chess-players, who had now interrupted their game and were leaning back in their chairs, evidently amused at the

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baffled faces of the searchers. "Here!" he said, "do you know one Yada—Mori Yada—a Japanese? Is he one of you?"

"Oh, yes!" answered one of the chess-players. "Yada,—yes! We know him—a very smart fellow, Yada. You know him—too?"

But before Ayscough could reply to this somewhat vexatious question, a man who had been left in the tea-rooms came hurrying up the staircase and burst in upon them. He made straight for the Inspector.

"Man from the office, Sir, outside in a taxi!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "You're on the wrong track—you're to get to Multenius's shop in Praed Street at once. The real man's there!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE JEW AND THE JAP

When Melky Rubinstein slipped quietly out of the police-station, he crossed the street, and taking up a position just within a narrow alley on the other side, set himself to watch the door which he had just quitted. There was a deep design in his mind, and he meant to carry it out—alone.

Mr. Mori Yada, apparently as cool and unconcerned as ever, presently tripped down the steps of the police-station and went leisurely off, swinging his neatly rolled umbrella. As long as he was within sight of the police-station windows he kept up the same gentle pace—but as soon as he had turned the first corner his steps were quickened, and he made for a spot to which Melky had expected him to make—a cab-rank, on which two or three taxi-cabs were drawn up. He had reached the first, and was addressing the driver, when Melky, who had kept a few yards in the rear, stole gently up to his side and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Mister!” said Melky. “A word—in private!”

Yada turned on his interrupter with the swiftness of a snake, and for a second his white teeth showed themselves in an unmistakable snarl, and a savage gleam came into his dark eyes. Both snarl and gleam passed as quickly as they had come, and the next instant he was smiling—as blandly as ever.

“Oh, yes!” he said. “It is you—how do you do?”

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Perhaps you are going my way—I can give you a lift—Yes?”

Melky drew his man away a yard or two, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Mister!” he said, with a note of deep confidence which made Yada look at him with a sudden sense of fear. “Mister!—I wouldn’t go no way at all if I was you—just now. You’re in danger, mister—you shoved your head into the lions’ den when you walked in where I’ve just seen you! Deep, deep is them fellows, mister!—they’re having you on toast. I know where you’re thinking of going, mister, in that cab. Don’t go—take my tip!”

“How do you know where I’m going?” demanded Yada.

“I was looking over Levendale’s shoulder when he wrote that bit of a cheque, mister,” answered Melky, in his quietest accents. “You’re off to his bank to turn it into cash. And—if you walk into that bank—well, you’ll never walk out again, alone! Mister!—they’re going to collar you there—there’s a trap laid for you!”

Melky was watching Yada’s face out of his own eye-corners, and he saw the olive-tinted skin pale a little, and the crafty eyes contract. And on the instant he pursued his tactics and his advantage. He had purposely steered the Japanese into a more crowded part of the street, and now he edged him into a bye-alley which led to a rookery of narrow bye-streets beyond. He felt that Yada was yielding—oppressed by a fear of the unknown. But suddenly Yada paused—drawing back from the hand which Melky had kept on his arm.

“What are you after?” he demanded. “What is your game eh? You think to alarm me!—what do you want?”

“Nothing unreasonable, mister,” answered Melky. “You’ll easily satisfy me. Game? Come, now, mister—I know your game! Bank first—to get some ready—then somewhere to pick up a bit of luggage—then, a railway station. That’s it, ain’t it, now? No blooming good, mister—they’re ready for you the minute you walk into that bank! If they don’t take you then, they’ll only wait to follow you to the station. Mister!—you ain’t a cat’s chance!—you’re done—if you don’t make it worth my while to help you! See?”

Yada looked round, doubtfully. They had turned two or three corners by that time, and were in a main street, which lay at the back of Praed Street. He glanced at Melky’s face—which suggested just then nothing but cunning and stratagem.

“What can you do for me?” he asked. “How much do you want? You want money, eh?”

“Make it a hundred quid, mister,” said Melky. “Just a hundred of the best, and I’ll put you where all the police in London won’t find you for the rest of today, and get you out of it at night in such a fashion that you’ll be as safe as if you was at home. You won’t never see your home in Japan, again, mister, if you don’t depend on yours truly! And a hundred ain’t nothing—considering what you’ve got at stake.”

“I haven’t a hundred pounds to give you,” answered Yada. “I have scarcely any money but this cheque.”

“In course you ain’t, mister!” agreed Melky. “I

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twigged your game straight off—you only came there to the police-station to put yourself in funds for your journey! But that's all right!—you come along of me, and let me put you in safety—then you give me that cheque—I'll get it cashed in ten minutes without going to any banks—see? Friend o' mine hereabouts—he'll cash it at his bank close by—anybody'll cash a cheque o' Levendale's. Come on, now, mister. We're close to that little port o' refuge I'm telling you about."

The bluff was going down—Melky felt, as much as saw, that Yada was swallowing it in buckets. And he slipped his hand within his companion's arm, piloted him along the street, across Praed Street, round the back of the houses into the narrow passage which communicated with the rear of the late Daniel Multenius's premises, and in at the little door which opened on the parlour wherein so many events had recently taken place.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Yada, suspiciously, as they crossed the threshold.

"All serene, mister!" answered Melky, re-assuringly. "Friend o' mine here—my cousin. All right—and all secure. You're as safe here as you will be in your grave, mister—s'elp me, you are! Zillah!"

Zillah walked into the parlour and justified Melky's supreme confidence in her by showing no surprise or embarrassment. She gave Yada the merest glance, and turned to Melky.

"Bit o' business with this young gentleman, Zillah," said Melky. "That little room, upstairs, now—what?"

"Oh, all right!" said Zillah, indifferently. "You know your way—you'll be quiet enough there."

Melky signed to Yada to follow him, and led the way up the stairs to the very top of the house. He conducted the Japanese into the small room in which were some ancient moth-and-worm-eaten bits of furniture, an old chest or two, and a plenitude of dust—and carefully closed the door when he and his captive had got inside.

“Now, mister!” he said, “you’re as safe here as you could be in any spot in the wide world. Let’s get to business—and let’s understand each other. You want that cheque turned into cash—you want to get out of London tonight? All right—then hand over your check and keep quiet till I come back. Is there anything else now—any bit of luggage you want?”

“You do all this if I pay you one hundred pounds?” asked Yada.

“That’ll do me, mister,” answered Melky. “I’m a poor fellow, d’ye see?—I don’t pick up a hundred quid every day, I assure you! So if there is anything—”

“A suit-case—at the luggage office at Oxford Circus Tube,” said Yada. “I must have it—papers, you understand. If you will get me that—”

“Give me the ticket—and that cheque,” said Melky. He slipped the two bits of paper into his pocket, and made for the door. “I’ll turn the key outside,” he said. “You’ll be safer. Make yourself comfortable, mister—I’ll be back in an hour with the money and the goods.”

Two minutes later Melky confronted Zillah in the parlour and grinned at her. Zillah regarded him suspiciously.

“What’s this, Melky?” she demanded. “What’re you up to?”

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“Zillah!” said Melky, “you’ll be proud of your cousin, Melky Rubinstein, before ever it’s dinner-time—you will do, Zillah! And in the meantime, keep your counsel, Zillah, while he fetches a nice large policeman.”

“Is that Japanese locked in that little room?” asked Zillah.

Melky tapped the side of his nose, and without a word looked out into the street. A policeman, large enough for all practical purposes, was lounging along the side-walk; another, equally bulky, was looking into a shop-window twenty yards away across the street. Within a couple of minutes Melky had both in the back-parlour and was giving them and Zillah a swift but particular account of his schemes.

“You’re sure you’re right, Melky?” asked Zillah. “You’re not making any mistake?”

“Mistake!” exclaimed Melky, satirically. “You’ll see about that in a minute! Now,” he added, turning to the policemen, “you come quietly up—and do exactly what I’ve told you. We’ll soon know about mistakes, Zillah!”

Yada, left to himself, had spent his time in gazing out of the dirty window of his prison. There was not much of a prospect. The window commanded the various jackyards of that quarter. As if to consider any possible chance of escape, he looked out. There was a projection beneath him, a convenient water-pipe—he might make a perilous descent, if need arose. But, somehow, he believed in that little Jew: he believed, much more, in the little Jew’s greed for a hundred pounds of ready money. The little Jew with the cunning smile had seen

his chance of making a quiet penny, and had taken it—it was all right, said Yada, all right. And yet, there was one horrible thought—supposing, now that Melky had got the cheque, that he cashed it and made off with all the money, never to return?

On top of that thought, Melky did return—much sooner than Yada had expected. He opened the door and beckoned the prisoner out into the dark lobby at the top of the stairs.

“Come here a minute, mister,” said Melky, invitingly. “Just a word!”

Yada, all unsuspecting, stepped out—and found his arms firmly gripped by two bulky policemen. The policemen were very quiet—but Melky laughed gleefully while Yada screamed and cursed him. And while he laughed Melky went through his prisoner’s pockets in a knowing and skilful fashion, and when he had found what he expected to find, he made his helpers lock Yada up again, and taking them downstairs to the parlour laid his discoveries on the table before them and Zillah. There was a great orange-yellow diamond in various folds of tissue-paper, and a thick wad of bank-notes, with an indiarubber band round them.

These valuables lay, carelessly displayed, on the table when the party from Pilmansey’s Tea Rooms came tumbling into the shop and the parlour, an hour later. Melky was calmly smoking a cigar—and he went on smoking it as he led the Inspector and his men upstairs to the prisoner. He could not deprive himself of the pleasure of a dig at Ayscough.

“Went one better than you again, Mr. Ayscough,”

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he said, as he laid his hand on the key of the locked room. "Now if I hadn't seen through my young gentleman—"

But there, as Melky threw open the door, his words of assurance came to an end. His face dropped as he stared into an empty room. Yada had risked his neck, and gone down the water-pipe.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THE DIAMOND NECKLACE

For the better part of a fortnight the sleuth-hounds of New Scotland Yard hunted for Mr. Mori Yada in all the likely and unlikely places in London and sent out their enquiries much further afield. They failed to find him. One small clue they got, with little difficulty. After the hue-and-cry was fairly out, an Edgware Road pawnbroker came forward and informed the police that at two o'clock, or thereabouts, on the afternoon of the day on which Yada had made his escape from the window, a young Japanese gentleman who gave his name as Mr. Motono and his address at a small hotel close by and who volunteered the explanation that he was temporarily short of cash until a remittance arrived, had borrowed five pounds from him on a pearl tie-pin which he had drawn from his cravat. That was Yada, without a doubt—but from that point Yada vanished.

But hunger is the cleverest detective, and at the end of the fortnight, certain officials of the Japanese embassy in London found themselves listening to a strange tale from the fugitive, who had come to the end of his loan, had nowhere to turn and no one but the representatives of his nation to whom he could appeal. Yada told a strange tale—and all the stranger because, as the police officials who were called in to hear it anew recognized that there was probably some truth in it. It

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amounted, when all was heard, to this—Yada was willing to confess that for a few days he had been a successful thief, but he stoutly denied that he was a murderer.

This was his story:—On the 18th November, in the evening, he was at the club which housed itself in Pilmansey's attic. There he saw Chang Li, who, according to the other members who were there, was beginning one of his periodic fits of opium smoking, and had been in the inner room, stupifying himself, since the previous day. Yada knew that it was highly necessary that Chang Li should be in attendance at certain classes at the medical school during the next few days, and tried to rouse him out of his debauch, with no result. Next day, the 19th, he went to Pilmansey's again—Chang Li was still in the realms of bliss and likely to stop there until he had had enough of them. For two days nobody at the club nor at the school had seen Chen Li—and Chen Li was the only person who could do anything with Chang. So, late that night of the 19th November, Yada went up to Maida Vale, taking Chang Li's keys with him. He admitted himself to garden and house and found the house empty. But just as he was entering the front door he heard the voice of Chen Li at the garden gate; he also heard the voice of an Englishman. Also he caught something of what that Englishman said. He was telling Chen Li that he'd better take him, the Englishman, inside, and settle with him—or things would be all the worse. And at that, he, Yada, had slipped into the house, quietly closed the front door behind him, gone into the front room, hidden himself behind a curtain and waited.

Into that front room, Chen Li had presently conducted

a man. He was, said Yada, a low-class Englishman—what is called a Cockney. He had begun to threaten Chen Li at once. He told his tale. He was, said this fellow, next door neighbour to Mr. Daniel Multenius, in Praed Street, Chen Li's landlord: his name, if Chen Li wanted to know it, was Parslett, fruiterer and green-grocer, and it was there, bold as brass, over his shop-door, for him or anybody to look at. He had a side-door to his house: that side-door was exactly opposite a side-door in Mr. Multenius's house, opening into his back-parlour. Now, the previous afternoon, he, Parslett, had had a consignment of very fine mushrooms sent in—rare things at that time of year—and knowing that the old man had a great taste for them and didn't mind what price he paid, he stepped across with a dish of them to tempt him. He found Mr. Multenius in his parlour—he was counting a lot of bank-notes—they must, said Parslett, have represented a large sum. The old man bade him leave the mushrooms, said he'd send him the money across presently, and motioned him out. Parslett put the dish of mushrooms aside on a chiffonier and went away. Somewhat later, chancing to be at his front door and looking out into the street, he saw Chen Li open the door of Multenius's shop and go swiftly away. Half-an-hour after that he heard that something had happened at Multenius's—later in the evening he heard definitely that the old man had been assaulted under circumstances which pointed to murder for the sake of robbery. And then he, Parslett, now put two and two together—and had fixed on Chen Li as the culprit. And now—how much was Chen Li going to pay for silence?

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According to Yada, Chen Li had had little to say—his chief anxiety, indeed, had been to find out what the man wanted. Parslett was definite enough about that. He wanted a thousand pounds—and he wanted it in gold, and as much of it as Chen Li could hand out there and then. He refused to believe that Chen Li hadn't gold in considerable quantity somewhere about—he must, said Parslett, have changed some of those notes since he had stolen them the previous day. Chen Li protested that he had but some fifty or sixty pounds in gold available—but he promised to have the rest of the thousand ready on the following evening. Finally, he handed Parslett fifty pounds, arranged that he should call the next night—and then invited him to take a drink. Parslett pocketed the money and accepted the invitation—and Yada, from his hiding-place, saw Chen Li go to the sideboard, mix whisky and soda and pour into the mixture a few drops from a phial which he took from his waistcoat pocket. Parslett drank off the contents of the glass—and Chen Li went down to the gate with him.

Yada followed to the front door and, through a slight opening, watched. The garden was fairly well lighted by the moon, which had recently risen. He saw Chen Li let the man out. He saw him turn from the gate and slowly come back towards the house. And then he saw something else—the sudden spring, from behind a big laurel bush, of a man—a short-statured, slight-figured man, who leapt on Chen Li with the agility of a panther. He saw the flash of a knife in the moonlight—he heard a muffled cry, and startled groan—and saw Chen Li pitch forward and lie evidently lifeless, where he fell. He saw

the assailant stoop, seize his victim by the shoulders and drag him behind the shrubbery. Then, without further delay, the murderer hurried to the gate. Evidently assured himself that there was no one about, let himself out, and was gone.

By all the solemn oaths that he could think of, Yada swore that this was true. Of another thing he was certain—the murderer was a Chinese.

Now began his own career of crime. He was just then very hard up. He had spent much more than his allowance—he was in debt at his lodgings and elsewhere. Somewhere, he felt sure, there was, in that house, the money which Chen Li had evidently stolen from old Mullenius. He immediately set to work to find it. But he had no difficulty—the bank-notes were in the drawer from which he had seen Chen Li take the gold which he had given to the blackmailer, Parslett. He hurriedly transferred them to his own pocket, and got away from the house by the door at the back of the garden—and it was not until late that night, in the privacy of his own rooms, that he found he had nearly eighty thousand pounds in his possession.

For some days, said Yada, he was at a loss what to do with his booty. He was afraid of attempting to change five hundred pound notes. He made cautious enquiries as to how that could be done—and he began to think that the notes were so much waste paper to him. And then Ayseough called on him—and for the first time, he heard the story of the orange-yellow diamond.

That gave him an idea. He had a very accurate knowledge of Chinese habits and characteristics, and he felt

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sure that Chen Li would have hidden that diamond in his pig-tail. So he took advantage of his possession of the detective's card to go to the mortuary, to get a minute or two alone with the body, and to slip his hand underneath the dead man's silk cap. There he found the diamond—and he knew that whether the bank-notes were to be of any value to him or not, the diamond would be if he could only escape to the Continent.

But—he wanted funds; wanted them badly. He thereupon conceived the bold idea of getting a reward for his knowledge. He went to the police-station with a merely modest motive in his mind—fifty pounds would carry him to Vienna, where he knew how to dispose of the diamond at once, with no questions asked. But when he found the owners of the diamond and the bank-notes present he decided to play for higher stakes. He got what he asked for—and, if it had not been for that little Jew, he said malevolently, he would have got out of England that eventful afternoon. But—it was not so written—and the game was up. Only—what he had said was true. Now let them do what they could for him—but let them search for Chen Li's murderer.

The folk who had been chiefly concerned about the orange-yellow diamond and the eighty thousand pounds' worth of Bank of England notes were not so much troubled about proving the truth of Yada's strange story as Yada himself was—the main point to them was that they had recovered their property. Naturally they felt remarkably grateful to Melky Rubinstein for his astuteness in circumventing Yada at what might have been

the last moment. And one day, at that portion of it when business was slack and everybody was feeling comfortable after dinner, Melky called on Mrs. Goldmark and became confidentially closeted with her in a little parlour behind her establishment which she kept sacred to herself. Mrs. Goldmark, who had quick eyes, noticed that Melky was wearing his best clothes, and a new silk hat, and new gloves, and had put his feet into patent-leather boots which she secretly and sympathizingly—felt to be at least a size too small for him. He sighed as he sat near her on the sofa—and Mrs. Goldmark looked at him with concern.

“Such a time you have lately, Mr. Rubinstein, don’t you?” she said feelingly. “Such worries—such troubles! And the risk you ran taking that wicked young man all by yourself—so brave of you! You’d ought to have one of these medals what they give to folks, so!”

“You think that?” responded Melky, brightening suspiciously. “Oh, Mrs. Goldmark, your words is like wine—all my life I been wishing some beautiful woman would say them things to me! Now I feel like I was two foot taller, Mrs. Goldmark! But I don’t want no medals—not me. Mr. Levendale and Mr. Purvis, they came to me and say they must give me a reward—handsome reward, you understand, for getting back their goods. So I say no—I won’t have nothing for myself—nothing. But, I say, just so—there is one that should be rewarded. Mrs. Goldmark!—do you know what? I think of you when I say that!”

Mrs. Goldmark uttered a feeble scream, clasped her

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hands, and stared at Melky out of her melting eyes.

"Me?" she exclaimed. "Why—I ain't done nothing, Mr. Rubinstein!"

"Listen to me," persisted Melky. "What I says to Mr. Levendale is this here—if Mrs. Goldmark hadn't had her eating establishment, and if Mr. Purvis hadn't gone into it to eat a chop and to drop his platinum solitaire on the table, and if Mrs. Goldmark hadn't taken care of that platinum solitaire, and if things hadn't sprung from it—eh, what then, I should like to know? So Mrs. Goldmark is entitled to whatever little present there is!—that's how I put it, Mrs. Goldmark. And Mr. Levendale and Mr. Purvis, they agreed with me—and oh, Mrs. Goldmark, ain't you going to be nice and let me put this round your beautiful neck?"

Mrs. Goldmark screamed again as Melky produced a diamond necklace, lying in a blue velvet bed in a fine morocco case. The glitter of the diamonds turned both beholders hoarse with emotion.

"Do you know what, Mrs. Goldmark!" whispered Melky. "It cost a thousand guineas—and no error! Now you bend your lovely head, and I puts it on you—oh, ain't you more beautiful than the Queen of Sheba! And ain't you Melky's queen, Mrs. Goldmark—say you was!"

"Lor', Mr. Rubinstein!" said Mrs. Goldmark, coyly. "It's as if you was proposing to me!"

"Why, ain't I?" exclaimed Melky, gathering courage. "Don't you see I'm in all my best clothes? Ain't it nothing but weddings, just now? There's Mr. Lauriston a-going to marry Zillah, and Mr. Purdie's a-fixing it up

with Levendale's governess, and—oh, Mrs. Goldmark, ain't I worshipped you every time I come to eat my dinner in your eating house? Ain't you the loveliest woman in all Paddington. Say the word, Mrs. Goldmark—don't you see I'm like as if I was that hungry I could eat you?"

Then Mrs. Goldmark said the word—and presently escaped from Melky's embrace to look at herself and her necklace in the mirror.

THE END

THE AMARANTH CLUB

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CHAPTER I

THE WAYSIDE INN

That there should have been a wayside inn there at all was often a source of wonder to folk who travelled along that lonely stretch of highway. There was no town near; there was no village in sight; save for an occasional farmstead set amongst its orchards and stackyards, and for the isolated cottages which presented themselves at odd corners of the land, there were few signs of human habitation, though very sharp and observant eyes might have detected here and there, far off above woods and trees, the vane on the apex of a village church, the high chimneys of some old country seat. But around the inn was solitude and loneliness. It stood where the high road was cut into by two narrower roads, a quaintly-gabled, old-world house, half obscured by tall clumps of elm and beech, a triangular stretch of green sward before its stone porch, and, swinging loosely above an ancient horse-trough, an old, dimly-coloured sign, on which some dead-and-gone hand had limned, stiffly and woodenly, the representatives of a desperate fox, closely followed by equally desperate and very red-tongued hounds. There was more of fitness in this sign than a casual observer knew of, for the business of the old inn depended largely on the presence of foxes in the coverts, and of hounds in the kennels,

which stood two miles away beyond the overhanging woods: in the hunting season it had trade and to spare; the old rooms were filled with life, the stables with three-hundred-guinea hunters; from September to April all was life and bustle, handsome men and pretty women, stable lads with attenuated calves, and grooms with horsey faces were here, there, and everywhere; a mere going-by-the-way traveller was at that time like to get scant attention. The harvest of the land was then over; the harvest of the "Fox-and-Hounds" at Highmaston cross roads was in full swing.

It was now high June, however, and the landlord of this wayside hostelry had little to do. Now and then, wayfarers, journeying from one town to another, dropped in at the rear of the house and drank their pints of ale as they rested in the kitchen; now and then a farmer drove up in his trap, or a tradesman in his cart; now and then the occupants of motor-cars slackened speed at the porch. But of the better trade of the house, plentiful enough during the hunting season, there was little trace in summer; the coffee-room was done up in brown holland, and the guest-chambers were closed, and the staff reduced to the landlord and his wife and daughter. Consequently, Hoskins, the landlord, took, at any time from May's arrival to August's departure, to idling his time away in something of a fashion more common in Spain than in England. He sat about a good deal in the sun, making use of a rustic bench which was placed in front of the house in the shade of a great clump of copper beech, enthroned there in peace and quietness, and, sometimes cheered by a glass and

a pipe of tobacco, he looked out on such life as the road afforded, and was mildly stirred by the first glimpse of vehicle or pedestrian which showed at the top of the hill a mile away. These moving and approaching dots on the long white stretch of road gave him food for speculation; they might be bringing interest and gossip, they might pass him by, and leave him still staring at them.

On this, a warm June morning, Hoskins, yesterday's newspaper on his knee, a highly-coloured handkerchief draped above his bald head, had dropped off to sleep in the most comfortable corner of his rustic bench. There were bees in the garden behind him; there were myriads of insects in the adjacent coppices and hedgerows; across the highway, under a fringe of alders and willows, a merry stream, not destitute of trout, ran between deep banks bright with coarse flowers. The humming of the bees, the perpetual singing murmur of the insects, the steady ripple of the clear water, soothed Hoskins to slumber; with thumbs locked across his well-filled waistcoat, and chin sunk in his white neckcloth, he slept and dreamed of hunting-days, when the scent carried strong and the winter afternoons and evenings brought jovial custom to the old house.

A sudden tap on the shoulder recalled Hoskins to life. He opened his eyes and clutched at the handkerchief which had slipped down across them, and he became aware of a motor-car which had come to a halt near the horse-trough, of a chauffeur who was in it, regarding him stolidly, and of a gentleman who, having given him that friendly tap, now stood before him, looking at him with amused eyes.

"You sleep well, my friend," observed the gentleman.

Hoskins rose to his feet with all the alacrity he could summon. With a swiftness due to a life-long habit of observing and summing up guests and customers, he looked the stranger over in one comprehensive glance. He saw a tallish, fattish man of blonde complexion, whose yellow moustache twisted away upwards to his eyes over a pair of well-filled pink cheeks, who wore a suit of blue serge—the blue of a rather brighter shade than is usually seen in this climate—a sliver-grey Homburg hat, and a fine diamond ring on the little finger of his plump left hand. He was a gentleman who, in some subtle fashion, suggested the idea of good eating and drinking, of ease and comfort, and Hoskins immediately comprehended that refreshment of some sort was desired.

"Drowsy morning, sir," said Hoskins, apologetically. "What can I do for you, sir?"

The stranger smiled.

"You do not remember me?" he suggested.

Hoskins made a longer examination of the pink face, the blue eyes, and the blonde moustache. He shook his head.

"Sorry to say I do not, sir," he replied. "Perhaps you were here in the hunting season, some time? We get a great many gentlemen in the hunting season—just for a mere call, sir."

"Just so. I was here in the hunting season—once. That is how I came to remember your inn. I had breakfast here one day. And to-day I want lunch. You can give me lunch?"

Hoskins pulled a face.

"It's our off-time, sir, as you'll understand," he said. "It's very rarely that we have any first-class custom here in summer. But if you can put up with what we've got——"

The stranger clapped Hoskins on the shoulder, pleasantly, affably.

"We will discuss matters," he said. "Now fetch out your best ale. Bring a glass for yourself, another for the driver—I will give him a drink before he goes. Then you and I will talk."

When Hoskins came back with a jug of the bitter beer for which that country is justly famous, the stranger was inspecting the flowers which Hoskins's women-folk carefully cultivated in the window-sills. He watched the chauffeur take off his glass with great interest; then he gave him his orders tersely.

"Now you may return," he said. "And you will come back here at precisely four o'clock. To the minute, you understand."

The motor-car turned, departed; the stranger took the glass of ale which Hoskins poured out, motioned the landlord to help himself, and, glass in hand, sat down on the rustic bench.

"Now let us arrange matters," he said. "To begin with, I want lunch for two people, to be served at, say, half-past one o'clock. I expect a friend. The friend is a lady. Therefore, we must do our best."

Hoskins screwed up his clean-shaven lips and rubbed his chin. The stranger smiled and waved his fingers.

"I see that you have good fowls," he said. "We have—yes—three hours in which to do things. The

very tenderest chickens you have, two—two of them. You have a good cook?"

"My wife will see to them, sir," answered Hoskins. "Leave it to her. And—I grow mushrooms. Forced, of course, but still——"

"Excellent! excellent! No doubt we can also make a salad. We will see what your garden contains," said the stranger. "Granted the necessary concomitants, I will myself mix the salad."

"And I have a beautiful York ham, cooked two days ago, and not yet cut," added Hoskins, "and a ripe Stilton cheese. And as for wines——"

The stranger wagged his head.

"I remember that I had excellent wine when I breakfasted here," he murmured. "Excellent!"

"I have some wine in my cellar," continued Hoskins, eyeing the stranger narrowly, "that came out of the Duke's sale five years ago. Lord Furzebushes always drinks it when he breakfasts here. Perhaps you would like to see what I have, sir?"

"A good suggestion," answered the stranger. "We will visit the cellar. Then, a nice, comfortable room wherein to lunch—your coffee-room, no doubt, is too ghostly, too much of a solitude at this time of year. I dislike eating in a wilderness of a room."

"Leave it to me, sir," replied Hoskins. "If you'll excuse me, I'll give orders about the chickens and the room, and then, perhaps, you'd like to examine the wines?"

The stranger dismissed Hoskins with a gracious wave of the hand, drank off his ale, lighted a cigar, and having looked about him, walked into the kitchen garden. There he cast a knowing eye on such green

things as promised well for the making of a spring salad; he roamed from bed to bed, nodding his head with satisfaction; he murmured a few words of delight at the presence of garden peas and new potatoes; he was as well content as an epicure who is properly assured of his next meal can be when the landlord fetched him to inspect the wine-cellar. In that cool and mystic recess he displayed the tastes and knowledge of a connoisseur; Hoskins presently left these lower regions, reverently and carefully carrying certain bottles which contained his choicest vintages. In their own parlour he remarked to his wife that he did not know his customer from Adam, but that he was likely to prove an uncommonly profitable one, seeing that he thought nothing of ordering wine at twenty-five and thirty shillings a bottle.

"Ah, and who may the lady be that's going to help him to drink it?" enquired Mrs. Hoskins. "Looks like a secret lovers' meeting of some sort, that's what it looks like, Hoskins, in my opinion, at any rate."

"It's naught to do with us, Mrs. Hoskins, whether it's secret or public," replied the landlord. "So long as there's a nice little bill to hand in, and good coin to meet it, I don't care what the occasion may be, nor who the lady is. All we've got to do is to give her every attention when she comes."

Nevertheless, Hoskins was not without a certain amount of curiosity as to the expected guest's arrival, and as the appointed hour drew near he hovered about the porch, wearing his best coat, and carrying a clean table-napkin in virtue of having elected him-

self to the office of waiter for the time being. That the lady was at hand Hoskins knew from the doings of the stranger, who, having lounged his time away in the garden, and inspected the room in which he was to entertain his visitor, had now strolled along one of the roads which cut off from the highway.

“Ah! coming from Ashminster direction, is she?” mused Hoskins. “A ten-mile drive, that, and naught much between it and us. And he came t’other way, from Lydeaster, and that motor he had was from Jobling’s place in Lydeaster—another ten-mile drive. Cert’ny there seems to be a good deal of mystery about these here proceedings—and maybe it is a secret meeting—and maybe——Hullo!”

Hoskins’s sudden ejaculation was caused by the appearance of a motor-car, which flashed round a curve of the narrow road in which the stranger was pacing, and at sight of him was quickly pulled up. The stranger swept off his Homburg hat in a profound bow, and bent his plump figure almost double as he approached the car, from which he at once assisted a tall and graceful lady, who appeared immediately to enter upon an animated and vivacious conversation. Presently the motor-car was turned about and disappeared in the direction from which it had come; the stranger and the lady paced slowly towards the door of the “Fox-and-Hounds.” And Mr. Hoskins, reasonably inquisitive, and reflecting that he was, after all, master of his own house and responsible for the respectability of all entrants, hastened to place himself in a certain nook wherefrom he could advantageously inspect the interesting visitor who was about to pass its portals.

Two minutes later the landlord went into the kitchen and winked at his wife.

“Maria!” he whispered. “I know who the lady is. It’s Lord Hartsdale’s sister—the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham. You know—her as used to be Miss Hilda, and married the Colonel. But—who’s the gentleman?”

CHAPTER II

SECRET ORDERS

The lady whom the mysterious gentleman assisted to alight in full view of the wayside inn had no sooner heard her chauffeur instructed and dismissed than she turned on her companion with an enquiry which was as inquisitive as it was eager.

“Otto!” she exclaimed. “What on earth possessed you to make an appointment at this place?”

“Good reasons, my dear lady,” answered the gentleman. “First, I knew you were staying with your brother, the estimable Lord Hartsdale, at his country seat, which is, I fancy, only some fifteen miles away, and therefore within easy distance of this inn. Second, I remembered the existence of this inn, having breakfasted in it one morning some years ago. Third, I knew that at this time of the year we should be free from interruption and observation here. And—we shall be. So I asked you to meet me here—and we have met. Now, I invite you to lunch.”

“On bread and cheese, I suppose?” remarked the lady, as they crossed the threshold of the porch.

“There will be bread, and there will be cheese. Also there will be—but we will not anticipate. Meanwhile——”

He led her into the comfortable and quiet apartment which he had himself chosen, and waved his

hand comprehensively towards a table which was distinctly gay with spotless linen, polished glass, and bright silver. His companion laughed.

"Of course!" she said. "You have been ransacking the resources. I might have known that whatever else Otto von Roon found in a remote country corner, he would find food—and drink. Yes, I smell something distinctly appetizing. And I see bottles with long necks."

Von Roon laughed too, and dropping into an easy-chair with a lack of ceremony which argued an easy intimacy with his guest, put the tips of his fingers together, and looked over them at her with a critical and yet admiring inspection. Drawn to her full height as she leisurely unpinned the flowing motor-veil from her hat, Hilda Tressingham made a distinct note of attractive womanhood. Tall, graceful, slender, she was the sort of woman who looks as well on foot as on horseback—a sure test. Her brown hair, worn in a great coil at the back of her shapely head, had a touch of gold in it; there was a touch of brown-gold in the hazel of her eyes; her full, red mouth parted to reveal perfect teeth; there was a dimple in her rounded chin, and healthy colour in her cheeks; at that moment she looked as fresh and attractive as a young woman well on the right side of thirty should look, and she smiled as she turned and caught Von Roon's gaze.

"You look very well," he observed impulsively. "What have you been doing, then?"

"Stagnating," she answered, with a light laugh. "What else is there to do—there? Hartsdale has no money, as usual, so nothing goes on. No one comes

to see us—we go nowhere. We eat our own mutton from the home farm, and our own potatoes from the kitchen garden, glaring at each other over the table. Otto! I am bored to death with all of it!”

“Well, it is at an end, then, I think,” said Von Roon. “I have something for you to do that will mean money and London—eh?”

Hilda Tressingham gave her companion a quick glance.

“That means—work?” she said.

“Of course. An easy matter—for you. I have come down to explain and discuss. But—here arrives our country fare.”

Hoskins, conscious of the identity of one of his guests, learnt nothing more of them or their meeting while he played his part of waiter. They talked the usual light talk of folk accustomed to London life; there was nothing to show that they were more than mere acquaintances. And when the meal came to an end, Von Roon made a move which surprised the landlord, who cherished the notion that here was a pair of lovers who wished for solitude.

“I observed your pleasant lawn and your shady cedar-tree, Mr. Landlord,” he said. “Pray have a table and chairs carried out to the tree, and we will take our coffee and liqueurs there.”

“I selected this shady tree,” said Von Roon, a little later, “because no room, however private, is precisely safe. The safest place in which to exchange secret or impart confidential business information is the centre of an open space.”

“Very well. And now? Is it a secret—or is it confidential business information?”

"Both. Shall we begin? Well, then. Your brother's place, Hartsdale Park, is within a few miles of Ashminster?"

"Three miles away."

"You know the town—the people?"

"I know the town. The people? Oh, I daresay Hartsdale knows some of them, and I've no doubt they know him, because he's sure to owe money there."

"Do you know the man who is Member of Parliament for Ashminster—Mr. George Ellington?"

"No; but I know of him, of course. His people are manufacturers in the place. Wealthy."

"Yes? Tell me about them—and him. Their class, now?"

"I said—they are manufacturers. Young Ellington, I have heard, was trained for political life—sent to some public school, then to Cambridge, then to some German university. I think the family had ambitions for him. Of course, their influence and money got him his seat."

"Just so. Well, some of their ambition is being satisfied. You did not read your newspapers this morning?"

"Not particularly."

"Ellington has been appointed Civil Lord of the Admiralty. I heard of it yesterday. It is, I understand, no very important post in your Government; nevertheless, the news that he has received this appointment made me write to you."

Hilda Tressingham gave her companion one of her searching glances. Von Roon's eyes were fixed on the branches of the cedar above him.

"Explain," she said.

"Yes. I understand that it is the rule that when one of your Parliamentary representatives is appointed to an office or profit under the Crown, he vacates his seat."

"Yes, that is so."

"And must offer himself for re-election. So—there will be an election—a bye-election—at Ashminster. Mr. George Ellington must be elected again."

"Well?"

"I understand that on two previous occasions he has only won the seat by a narrow majority. Consequently, his opponents will certainly fight him. He will not have a walk-over: there will be a contest."

"Well?"

Von Roon withdrew his gaze from the cedars, and for a fleeting moment fixed it on his companion.

"I want you to take part in it."

"I? For what reason?"

"Obvious. I want you to cultivate the acquaintance of Mr. George Ellington. It will be easy. I am already aware that your brother is a member of the same political party."

"I don't believe Hartsdale cares twopence for either party!"

"But he is nominally of Ellington's party. I assured myself of that yesterday. That is fortunate."

"Fortunate?"

"Fortunate. Because, as you are at present rusticated at Hartsdale Park, and have nothing to do, and as there is an election in process at your country town, and as Lord Hartsdale is a supporter of this

Government, why, nothing is so natural as that Lord Hartsdale's sister should go and offer her assistance to the Government candidate. It is—excellently convenient."

"Is it? And what am I to do, my friend? I know nothing about assisting Parliamentary candidates."

"That is easy. For you it is child's play. Attend! You will present yourself at Ellington's committee-rooms: you will make yourself known to him: you will offer to help: you will propose to canvass the electors on his behalf. You will be very nice: you will ingratiate yourself with him."

"And—why?"

"Because I want you to cultivate the friendship of the Civil Lord of the Admiralty."

Hilda Tressingham made no answer to this, but presently she gave Von Roon another glance, at which he nodded his head.

"Precisely," he said. "You see my meaning, my intention. Now, tell me—is this young politician married?"

"I think so—yes. To a cousin—or something of that sort. I remember, now—I have seen them both—at a flower show."

"Was it," said Von Roon with a slight laugh, "was it sufficient to enable you to form an estimate of them?"

"I should say he is vain, self-confident, a little inclined to be bumptious," she answered slowly. "The woman—colourless. But, I believe, ambitious of social advancement."

"Capital! Capital! Hilda! the gods work for us!

Now, some more of my counsels. Cultivate these people. Profess a tremendous interest in politics—in his, of course. Make yourself useful to him in this election. Get yourself asked to their house. Persuade Hartsdale to ask them to his.”

“To boiled mutton—possibly cold?” she said cynically.

“To bread and cheese, if you like: they’ll come. Take the woman up—play round her. And ask him to come and see you in town as soon as the election is over. He’ll come—alone.”

“So—I am to return to town when the election is over?” she asked after a pause.

“At once. The next stages will come off there. Play your cards well during the election. Concentrate on that. Afterwards—well, we shall see.”

There was a further silence after this; the man continued to smoke and to stare at the overhanging branches; the woman, who had broken off a twig from the cedar, continued to snap it into tiny fragments. After a time she gave her companion another glance.

“I think I understand the part,” she said. “Leave it to me until——”

“Until I give you further instructions,” said Von Roon quickly. “What you have at present is sufficient to go on with. Now, we come to the question of—money.”

“Yes,” she answered, a little hurriedly. “There’s this certain, Otto: I can’t go back to town until I can settle up with Bernstein. It’s absolutely impossible. You may as well know that.”

Von Roon made no immediate reply. But pres-

ently throwing away his cigar, he drew some papers from his breast-pocket, and, selecting one, unfolded and showed it to his companion.

"There!" he said. "That's Bernstein's promissory note—or, rather, yours to him. Look at it!"

She made a sudden motion as if to snatch the paper from his hand.

Von Roon withdrew it with a smile.

"My property, Hilda," he said.

"So you've paid him," she muttered sullenly. "Well, then——"

"Well, then, there's no need for you to trouble further," he said, replacing the paper in his pocket. "So you can return to your modest *ménage* in Mayfair when this election is over. And now, as regards ready money—always welcome and necessary. I have some for you in my pocket-book. But this is—a little public. Let us stroll into the recesses of that charming wood yonder. Come!"

CHAPTER III

THE AGENT'S ROOM

Whatever feelings of gratification and glory were aroused in the bosom of Mr. George Ellington, his family, and his friends, by his appointment to be Civil Lord of the Admiralty were far from being shared in by Mr. Septimus Crashaw, agent to the Radical party in Ashminster. Crashaw, instead of receiving the glad tidings with joy, received them with deep disgust. He felt and expressed a personal grievance against the Prime Minister for being so callously inconsiderate as to force a bye-election upon him, Septimus, at that precise moment. And when the new Civil Lord came down, a little swollen with his new grandeur, to offer himself for re-election, the agent greeted him with complaints and dismal forebodings.

“You may as well make up your mind to a stiffish fight, Mr. George,” remarked Crashaw, who, having known the young politician from childhood, invariably adopted an easy familiarity with him. “It’s not going to be a walk-over, you know! We’d only a majority of sixty odd at the last election, and that’s easily turned into a minority in a constituency like ours. Again, this is the fourth year the Government’s been in power, and all the keenness is worn

off—it's always worn off by the fourth year. And the register's in a rotten state. If only it had been next year we'd have had a better register. And our opponents have been working hard, and they've got a rattling good man in Colonel Emsworth. He'll take some beating this time."

"Don't croak, Crashaw," said the new Civil Lord. "I've beaten Colonel Emsworth twice, and I'll beat him again. All that's necessary is to get our forces together and have a good pitch in. We'll win all right."

Crashaw, a little man of nervous eye and hand, looked over his desk at the young man to whom life had so far brought nothing but success. He admired George Ellington's easy assurance, his wholehearted confidence in himself, and his lucky star; certainly he had seemed to be born to good luck, and had gone on experiencing good luck ever since. His father, John Ellington, the millionaire manufacturer, had destined young George for a political life from the moment of his birth; he had educated and trained him with that one notion; he had kept the Ashminster seat warm for him, and at the age of twenty-three George had taken possession of it and held it. Everybody who knew anything knew that the young man was sure of minor office before he was thirty; he had been sedulously trained to be one of those useful Parliamentarians who live on Hansard, and Blue Books, and White Papers, and statistics and figures: he had served a Cabinet Minister as unpaid private secretary; he had earned his present appointment. And as he stood on Crashaw's hearthrug—a tall, well-set-up, athletic young Englishman, handsome

and gay with prosperity—the little agent recognized an aroma of success, and wagged his tousled head at it.

“Well, you were never without plenty of assurance and confidence, Mr. George,” he remarked, “and it’s an uncommonly good thing to have, sir. But, as I was saying to your father last night, I wish we’d been a bit more prepared. However, as you say, we must get all our forces together. And, by the by, whom do you think I had in here yesterday afternoon, asking if she might come and canvass for you? You wouldn’t guess in a blue month!”

“Who, then?” demanded George Ellington.

Crashaw glanced up at his candidate with a sly expression.

“Ah!” he said. “Well—Lord Hartsdale’s sister.”

Ellington whistled. His eyebrows arched themselves.

“You mean Colonel Tressingham’s wife?” he exclaimed.

“That’s right. There’s her card: The Honourable Mrs. Tressingham. She seemed quite keen about it, and she knows a lot about politics. We’d quite a long chat. Said she was sorry she hadn’t the pleasure of knowing you, but she’d be delighted to come and work for you. And—I told her to come.”

Ellington picked up the card to which the agent pointed. He was wondering why the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham wished to come and work for him. He had known her and her family by sight and by reputation all his life; this was the first time in his knowledge that she or her brother had ever taken any active interest in the affairs of Ashminster. Previous

to her marriage to Colonel Tressingham, a hard-bitten soldier, some fifteen years her senior, Hilda had only been known to the folk around Hartsdale Park as a young lady who devoted her days to horses and dogs, and the simple delights to be got out of an impoverished estate; since that marriage she had been a few years in India, where her husband, now retired from the Army, still remained in connection with the management of some estate in which he was interested; since her return to England, Ellington had heard of her as a smart woman about town, moving in a set with which he had nothing to do. He knew that Lord Hartsdale nominally belonged to his own party in politics, and occasionally presented himself to give a party vote in the House of Lords; but the family had never shown any concern in politics, and it puzzled him to think that Mrs. Tressingham should begin to do so at this particular juncture. And as he laid down her card, he looked at Septimus Crashaw with a whimsical enquiry.

“What does it mean?” he asked.

Crashaw shrugged his shoulders.

“How do I know what a fine lady means?” he answered. “Wants a bit of excitement, a new sensation, I should think. Isn’t her husband still away there in India? And I hear there are no children. I should say she’s tired of rustivating at Hartsdale. They say there’s nobody there but his lordship and herself—never have any guests—nothing doing. I hear he’s hard up, as usual—owes piles of money in this place, anyhow. In fact, that made me a bit dubious, Mr. George.”

“Dubious? Why dubious?” asked Ellington.

"They're not too popular in Ashminster, you know," said Crashaw. "At least, his lordship isn't. The tradesmen don't like him, because after getting pretty deep in their books he started ordering his things from town. All the same——"

He paused, and, biting the end of his pen, looked knowingly at the candidate.

"Well?" said Ellington. "All the same—what?"

"She's a very handsome woman, and a very fascinating woman, and she can talk sixteen to the dozen," continued Crashaw. "And there's a certain class of voters that can be got round by a pretty woman with a smart tongue where nobody else can do it. She might be useful."

"Of course we'll use her," said Ellington. "We're not going to refuse help from anyone who offers it. We——"

Just then a youth opened the door of the agent's room and put his head inside.

"There's a lady to see you, Mr. Crashaw," he said. "Mrs. Tressingham."

Crashaw glanced at his principal and, catching a mere expression, turned to the youth.

"Show Mrs. Tressingham in at once," he said. He leaned across the side of his desk and slightly altered the position of an easy-chair that stood by it. "Now you can talk to her yourself," he observed with a significant smile. "Or—listen to her."

George Ellington, a little shy, a little uncomfortable, remained standing on the hearthrug, his eyes fixed expectantly on the door. He was conscious, in a queer, vague fashion, that this was an essentially new moment in his life—why, he could not possibly

have explained to himself or to anyone; all he knew was that the feeling was there. He fidgeted a little as he watched for the visitor's entrance.

Hilda Tressingham, gowned and hatted in a fashion with which Ashminster folk were not familiar, purposely looking her best, swept into the agent's room with her most brilliant smile, and waited for no formal introduction to the young politician. She had never spoken to George Ellington in her life, but she held out her hand to him as if they had been old friends, at the same time favouring Septimus Crashaw with a familiar nod. The two men were immediately conscious of a taking and attractive personality; the shabby little room with its litter of papers, bills, addresses, and books became suddenly transformed.

"How do you do, Mr. Ellington?" said Mrs. Tressingham, with a charming candour and frankness. "We can dispense with a formal introduction, I'm sure. I'm so glad to hear of your—what shall we call it?—honours? And no doubt Mr. Crashaw has told you that I want to help in your bye-election. You'll let me do what I can—won't you?"

Ellington handed her to the easy-chair, still looking closely at her. He was thinking her a most remarkably pretty woman: the feeling of vague uneasiness was also still strong in him.

"It's most awfully kind of you, Mrs. Tressingham," he said. And then, pulling his moustache, and still gazing at her, he continued, a little awkwardly: "I—I didn't know that you were interested in politics."

"I'm beginning to be," she replied promptly.

"I'm learning—rapidly. I think Mr. Crashaw can assure you that I'm pretty well up in—things as they are."

"Quite well up," said Crashaw, with a smile. "Mrs. Tressingham is quite conversant with all that's going on."

"Fitted to discuss situations with the average voter?" she asked, laughing.

"Well fitted," answered the agent. "On the broad lines, at any rate."

Ellington still stood staring and pulling his moustache. And Hilda Tressingham was watching him and dissecting him. She had seen him—in a casual and unconcerned fashion—before, and knew him for a good-looking man of under thirty, who might have passed well for a country squire or a gentleman farmer rather than for a politician—a tall, well-built man, athletic of figure, bronzed, as if with abundance of outdoor life, rather than pallid with poring over books and papers—fair-haired, blue-eyed, well-featured, amiable of expression. But now she looked deeper, estimating his character and possibilities. And she decided that in spite of the undoubted signs of mental and intellectual strength in his face and head, George Ellington had a considerable spice of vanity, and was to be cajoled and persuaded, and she experienced a pleasurable sense of coming victory, and a keen appetite for the delight she would obtain in fighting for it.

"I can twist him round my finger as easily as I twist this ring!" she thought, still looking at him. And then she said aloud, turning to the agent:

"What are you going to give me to do, Mr. Crashaw?"

Septimus Crashaw glanced at Ellington.

"I have just been considering matters," said Crashaw. "I want to give special attention to the voters in Saint Sepulchre's Ward. They're—flabby. A little pleasant chat might do wonders. I was going to ask you to go there yourself, Mr. George. Here's the list of the folks I want you particularly to see. Now, suppose you take Mrs. Tressingham with you?"

Ellington looked at his volunteer.

"Would you like that?" he asked abruptly. "It's not a very nice quarter of the town, that, Crashaw, though—perhaps——"

He looked at Mrs. Tressingham again. But she had already risen, and Septimus Crashaw laughed softly.

"I know it isn't a nice quarter," he said. "That's precisely why I want you to go there personally. And I'm sure it will do good if Mrs. Tressingham goes with you. Talk to the women—they've more influence over their husbands than one usually reckons for. Give them plenty of blarney and soft soap. Kiss the babies."

"I shall leave that part of the business to Mr. Ellington," said Hilda. "He has had experience."

Ellington felt a curious sense of elation and pleasure as he walked along the High Street of Ashminster in company with Lord Hartsdale's beautiful sister. In spite of his education and his career and his promise of the future, there was a tiny vein of snob-bishness in him; brought up amongst purely manu-

facturing folk, he had not yet cast off a certain awe for and admiration of the aristocracy; he was almost weakly conscious that it was a very fine thing to have the sister of a peer at his side. Very soon he had further reason for pride and for self-congratulation, for he discovered that Crashaw had been right when he said that Mrs. Tressingham could talk. During the rest of that morning he followed her about admiringly, letting her use her powers of persuasion as she pleased, and only putting in a word or two of his own when it seemed absolutely necessary. And the time flew by so quickly that he was astonished when his companion suddenly stopped and laid a hand on his arm.

“There! not a step further, now!” she said, laughing. “You must give me some lunch.”

CHAPTER IV

EN FAMILLE

Ellington pulled out his watch, conscience-stricken. It was half-past one; they had been up one dismal street and down another for two hours.

"I am sorry," he said. "I—the fact is, I was so interested in hearing you give full play to your powers of persuasion. Lunch? Of course! You must come home with me. We lunch at two o'clock."

"Mrs. Ellington?" she said, with a smile.

"Yes? What of Mrs. Ellington?" he asked.

"Unexpected guests, you know," she answered.

"They're not always welcome."

Ellington threw up his head with a laugh.

"Oh!" he said. "If that's all, my experience is that at election times one keeps open house. I can't promise you that you shall lunch in peace and quietness, for we never know who mayn't or will drop in; but I can promise you a hearty welcome."

"And something to eat and drink, I hope," she said.

"Both. Come along! There's a cab-rank round this corner. We'll drive home at once. Put it down to the pleasure of listening to you expatiating on the virtues of the Government that I didn't think of lunch before."

Ellington had lost all shyness of his helper by this time, and he talked freely and gaily as they drove through the town to the suburb in which he lived. Mrs. Tressingham knew his house by sight—she had often ridden or driven past it and exercised her powers of satire upon it. Some years before, Ellington Senior, following the fashion of most men who make money on a large scale, had been minded to build himself a house. Then he had remembered that a time would come when George, then at Cambridge, would also want a house, and he had decided to build one for his son as well as one for himself. And being a man of a prim and precise mind, a staunch believer in mathematical proportion, he had caused the two new mansions to be built exactly alike and under like conditions of situation, arrangement, and aspect. Each faced the south; each had similar gardens, lawns, and shrubberies; each was in imitation of what is commonly known as the Queen Anne style of architecture; each was still, at the end of a decade, of a brand-new, freshly-swept and garnished appearance. Looked at from the distance of half a mile there was nothing by which to differentiate one from the other; it was only when one had climbed to the top of the gentle eminence from which they overlooked the town and Ellington's Mills that one found them to differ in one slight respect. On the entrance gates of the Ellington Senior residence appeared the name of "Ashcroft"; on those of the Ellington Junior house the name "Oakcroft." Ellington Senior conceived this trifling difference to be a stroke of genius.

Hilda Tressingham, walking at Ellington's side up the asphalted carriage drive which led from the en-

trance gates to the house, was vividly conscious of the intense newness of the place and of the evidences of the money which had been laid out upon it. Here were trees, shrubs, flowers, all in a state of high cultivation, but all painfully precise and scrupulously arranged, as if they were designed to exhibit themselves as specimens of arboriculture and horticulture. The twin-houses were furnished with vast conservatories; through the glass of that which she was approaching, Hilda beheld tropical visions which reminded her of the palm-houses at Kew Gardens. She mentally contrasted all the carefully-swept-up appearance of the scene around her with the old gardens at Hartsdale Park, with their five-hundred-year-old turf, their spreading cedars and beeches, their grey walls and mossy ruins, their general air of neglect and of careless handling. She was still wondering if the picturesqueness of poverty is to be preferred to the aggressiveness of wealth, when George Ellington led her into a room in which several people were obviously waiting for lunch.

Ellington turned upon her with a reassuring glance as they entered.

"A mere family gathering," he said. "I only got down this morning, so I haven't seen any of my people yet. Letty," he went on, as a young woman came hastily forward, looking a little surprised and startled. "This is Mrs. Tressingham, who has been so kind as to give me her help in canvassing. We've been doing part of the Saint Sepulchre Ward, and we're hungry and thirsty."

Then he introduced his father, and his sister, and a young gentleman of legal aspect, whose name the

visitor failed to catch, and Mrs. Tressingham shook hands with everybody, and protested that canvassing was awfully hungry work, and immediately attached herself to Ellington Senior, whom she had known by sight all her life, and had never spoken to before, and began to make herself very attractive to him.

"I was not aware," said Ellington Senior, who was as precise in his speech as in his general notions, "I was not aware that you took an interest in political affairs."

"I am afraid that I have neglected my opportunities," replied Hilda. "But I am striving to atone. And really, you know, Mr. Ellington, I have not had so much opportunity, after all. However, we have always been on the right side."

"Ye—es," remarked Ellington Senior, swinging his eye-glasses. "Ye—es. Still, I do not remember that during the time in which I represented the town in Parliament, or in the time during which my son has represented it, any member of your family has actively engaged in these contests. Of course, your brother being a peer of the realm——"

"Couldn't interfere, of course," said Hilda. "Well, I'm going to make up." She looked round and smiled at young Mrs. Ellington, who was watching her with absorbed interest. "I shall come to you for counsel and instruction, Mrs. Ellington," she added. "I suppose you're an adept by this time?"

Young Mrs. Ellington blushed and glanced nervously at her husband. But the new Civil Lord was engaged in conversation with his sister and the young, legal-looking gentleman, and she had to find words for herself.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Tressingham," she answered. "I—perhaps I ought to know more about politics than I do."

Ellington Senior, who had remained in a species of judicial attitude on the hearthrug, cleared his throat and swung his eye-glasses.

"The ladies of our family," he said oracularly, "have never taken an active part in politics, though they have always displayed, I think, an intelligent interest in them. However, in the present generation, my daughter"—here he waved the glasses towards the group which had drawn apart—"my daughter Marcia is actively engaging herself in what one might almost term the aggressive movement of—shall I coin a word?—forwardism—yes, forwardism expresses what I mean. She belongs to various women's societies, associations, enterprises—with some of which, I confess, I am not altogether in sympathy."

Hilda turned to bestow a moment's glance on Miss Marcia Ellington. She had already sized up Ellington Senior and his daughter-in-law. In her opinion, neither was of the plastic type represented by George; neither would at any time be easily led or influenced. Stephen Ellington, then approaching his seventieth year, was one of those old gentlemen who look as if they had been specially preserved by some patent process in order to look well and wiry in old age. He was tall and thin, and somewhat ascetic of aspect; he had a sharp nose, a cold, bright eye, and a mouth which denoted firmness, severity, and a disposition to judicial pronouncements: a precise formalism seemed to ooze from every fold of his garments, Quaker-like in hue and cut. His upper lip

was clean-shaven, the rest of his chin and cheeks bearded; the beard was trimmed to a point as precise as the black cravat which it partly concealed; his frock coat hung in straight lines; his boots were square-toed. Hilda set Ellington Senior down in her innermost tablets as a Puritanical old prig who was probably as purse-proud as he was pragmatical. And turning to give Marcia a quick inspection, she was at once conscious that Miss Ellington was much more like her father than her brother. She had dim recollections of having heard that the old manufacturer's daughter was clever, that she had been at Girton, or Newnham, or at some other equally horrible place; that she spoke at meetings, and occasionally contributed articles on political and economic subjects to the newspapers and periodicals; now that she met her in the flesh she was quite disposed to believe all these rumours. Marcia Ellington was one of those raw-boned, high-coloured young women who appear to delight in wearing mannish clothes, neglecting their hair and their hands, and in looking upon all other people from well above the bridges of their own noses. She communicated an impression of satirical superiority, and nervous people fled from her, feeling that if she condescended to talk to them at all, it was only that she might dissect them or make a species of intellectual fun out of them. Young men and women who cultivated a passion for what they had persuaded themselves into calling the Higher Culture, sat at Marcia's feet with pleasure, learning from her how goodly it is to despise all people who happen to be ordinary. She inculcated upon such a philosophy which comprised a high, stoical indifference to every-

thing which came within her own conception of sham, cant, and humbug, and wherever she spoke, her audience felt as if they were being fed upon the pure ether of the upper regions—unless, indeed, they were utter Philistines and honest enough to say that they didn't know what Marcia was talking about, and didn't believe, either, that she knew herself.

Marcia, duly planted opposite Mrs. Tressingham at table, eyed that lady's fine feathers pretty much as Diogenes might have eyed the discarded finery of his dissolute and extravagant youth. She sniffed, and George Ellington felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He knew the signs which showed that his sister was longing to give battle.

"I hope, Mrs. Tressingham, that as you have entered the political arena you will be found on the right side," said Marcia, in her deep, platform voice, as she trifled with certain vegetable food which she ate in a resigned fashion. "It is so important that all women should be on the right side—so very important."

"Yes?" said Hilda. She looked up from her plate and favoured Marcia with a full discharge from the battery of her large eyes. "I am on your brother's side—of course," she added.

Marcia smiled faintly.

"You misunderstand me. I referred to the higher planes of politics," she said. "The superstructures."

"Ah! But I am still on the lower slopes," replied Hilda. "I am only beginning the ascent of the mountain. You, I suppose,"—she threw an almost child-like candour and innocence into her tone—"you,

I suppose, Miss Ellington, breathe only the finer air of the summit?"

George Ellington broke into the conversation, with a purpose. He had no mind to hear Marcia begin a lecture.

"My sister," he said, "believes that practical politics is waste of time. She is not concerned with concrete facts—she wants elections to be fought on abstractions."

"Is the development of the higher life in a nation an abstractive, then?" demanded Marcia.

"I don't know what the development of the higher life in a nation is," retorted George Ellington brusquely. "I know what it means to provide and to keep up an army and a navy, and to find money for education and a heap of other things."

"In other words, to minister to the material," said Marcia calmly. "It is the curse of all parties. I don't blame yours alone, George."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Ellington. "And—don't try to take a vote from me, Marcia. I shall want every one I can get. That's why it's so good of Mrs. Tressingham to help me. We want every helper we can muster. Crashaw's almost sweating with fear. So you'd better put your principles in your pocket, Marcia, and go out and tell the people that as they can't get that rare perfection which you would give them if you were dictator, they'd better take a small step towards it by electing me again. We can give them a crumb or two, you know, even if we can't give them that mighty loaf you dream of. Are you going to exercise your persuasive powers again this afternoon, Mrs. Tressingham?"

Hilda beamed upon him.

"Of course!" she answered. "I must, at any rate, do an eight hours' day."

"Then I think you and my wife might tackle that St. Sepulchre's district again," said Ellington. "I've two or three committee meetings, but I'll try to join you later on. You'll go with Mrs. Tressingham, Letty?"

Hilda turned one of her most fascinating smiles on her hostess.

"Do come!" she said. "We shall achieve wonders—together."

And she knew from Letty's answering smile that Letty would be only too delighted.

CHAPTER V

BROTHER AND SISTER

Hilda Tressingham, having young Mrs. Ellington thus handed over to her, experienced the same feeling which we may conceive a caged bird of prey to feel when some good stroke of fortune or a keeper's whim puts it in possession of a rabbit which it may skin or a pigeon which it may pluck. She was not above listening to such gossip of the town and countryside as filtered to Hartsdale Park through the tradesfolk and the servants, and she knew Letty Ellington's history. She was an orphan, she was Ellington Senior's ward, and she was rich. It had always been an understood thing that she should marry George Ellington, and when the proper time arrived she had fulfilled her part of the understanding, having previously been trained for her future career by an education at expensive establishments at Brighton and in Paris. Of a placid, equable, and easily-moulded character and temperament, she had accepted the lot marked out for her by Ellington Senior without demur; she had been taught from babyhood to regard George as the handsomest and cleverest of male creatures, and in her own fashion she worshipped him. She knew enough to look after the well-conducting of "Oakcroft"; she appeared to advantage in the Ellington motor-cars and

the Ellington carriages, and at the head of her own table; she could smile and bow prettily to constituents, and, at a pinch, utter a word or two of graceful platitude on opening a bazaar or turning a gold key in the door of a cottage hospital or a new infirmary, and the Ellington family were very well satisfied with her. In their opinion, she had every reason to be satisfied with them and with herself.

But Letty, in spite of her pretty placidity, had a secret cause of dissatisfaction. The Ellingtons, father and son, Radical enough in politics, were essentially Conservative in their private notions of life. And one notion which they shared and clung to was that it was not at all necessary to keep up a house in town. During the ten years in which Ellington Senior represented Ashminster in the House of Commons, he had tenanted a modest flat in Queen Anne's Mansions, sleeping in it while the House was in session from Monday night to Thursday night: every Friday evening had seen him post off to Ashminster and home for a full-sized week-end. George Ellington had followed his father's example, living a bachelor life for four or five days in the same flat and returning to Letty and "Oakcroft" for the rest of the week. It seemed to him a wise, business-like arrangement which worked well. But Letty secretly resented it. She read all the fashionable intelligence in the newspapers, and she wished to live in town, at any rate, during the season. And before Hilda Tressingham and she had gone far on their canvassing expedition, Hilda had wormed Letty's secret out of her, and was properly and warmly sympathetic.

"But now that Mr. Ellington is a member of the

Government, of course you'll have to take a town house!" she exclaimed. "It's absolutely necessary. You must let me find one for you. If you want a furnished house, why, Hartsdale has his place in Curzon Street empty at this very minute, and he'd be glad to let it."

Letty Ellington thought that would be delightful—if only George could be got to see the wisdom of such a course. And Hilda promised to speak to George when an opportunity came, and she went home to Hartsdale Park cogitating schemes of her own as well as those which more strictly appertained to Otto von Roon.

Hartsdale Park looked unusually grey and gloomy after the obtrusive newness of the Ellington establishments. Its great rooms, scarcely used, seemed like vaults in which the ghosts of the past lay unswept and uncared for: an aspect of splendid poverty lay over everything. A continuous devotion on the part of successive generations to horses, cards, dogs, and wine had brought the Hartsdale family fortunes to a low ebb, and the present head of the house saw no particular way of improving them. Whatever ambition he had ever possessed in that direction had died out before his thirtieth year arrived; he now lived a more or less hermit-like life in a corner of the old edifice which had been reared with care and pride by an Elizabethan ancestor and had ever since been allowed to drop towards ruin. A room or two, he said, was enough to house him, a servant or two to attend to his small requirements. He had a gun and a dog, a fishing-rod, a library—these things, with a horse and a pipe, were all he needed. He had ac-

cepted his sister's descent upon him without pleasure or protest, knowing very well that she had only made a retreat to Hartsdale Park because London was for some reason or other rather too hot to hold her for awhile, and he made no alteration in his mode of life because of her presence. He talked to her when it pleased him to do so; he ate his plain dinner every night in her company. As to entertaining her or doing anything to amuse her, the thought never entered his head.

Hilda found her brother where she expected to find him—in a room which he had gradually transformed into a species of cell, keeping in it the things and objects and books he wanted. He stood at a side-table mixing himself a drink—an untidy figure in a much-worn tweed suit. On the centre table lay the parts of a gun which he had been cleaning; his hands were black with oil, there was a smudge on his cheek; his beard was untrimmed, his hair untidy—Hilda had a sudden vision of him getting grey and bent, and at last moving about the park outside as worn down as any of the labourers on the land. He growled a surly response as she gave him a word of greeting and dropped into a chair.

"I wish you'd give me a whisky and soda, Hartsdale," she said. "I'm dead-beat. Hand that over, there's a dear, and get another glass for yourself."

It was Lord Hartsdale's way to do things in silence; he passed over the glass and watched her gulp half the contents before he turned to help himself.

"That's better!" said his sister. "I wanted that. You'd never guess what I've been doing. Canvassing for votes—for George Ellington."

He turned and glanced at her in surprise.

"Didn't know you knew George Ellington," he said.

"I didn't—until this morning. But—you saw that he'd got a place, I suppose? Some minor office."

"Well?"

"Well, I thought I'd like to amuse myself with a bit of electioneering experience. So I went over to Ashminster and volunteered. I lunched with him and his wife, and with his awful father and much more awful sister. And I think I may have done you a good turn."

"Me?"

"Don't snap my head off, Hartsdale! I'm sure somebody ought to do you a good turn—you want it! About the house in Curzon Street—you know it's standing there empty and you never use it."

"Well—what then?"

"Now that George Ellington's got this post, of course he must have a town house. Let yours to him."

Lord Hartsdale laughed incredulously, and he picked up the barrel of his gun and began to rub it with an oily rag.

"What rot! Who do you suppose would take an old mausoleum like that? I don't know when I was last in it, but I seem to recollect that the paper was hanging in festoons, the furniture mouldy, and the carpets in rags and tatters."

"That's a mere detail," remarked Hilda coolly. She picked out a cigarette from an open box and, lighting it, sat down again. "If I can get the Ellingtons to take that house I'll transform it into a highly

desirable and eligible town residence in less time than it takes to talk about it. The furniture's magnificent old stuff—you know it is. New paint, new paper, new carpets—that's all that's wanted."

"And who's going to pay for 'em, pray?" growled his lordship with a sneer. "There's neither cash nor credit going."

"Leave that to me," she answered. "And don't be an ass about it, Hartsdale! These Ellingtons have piles of money—why shouldn't you have a couple of thousand a year from them for that house instead of letting it fall to pieces?"

"Couple of thousand! You don't mean to say they'd be fools enough to fork out all that?"

"I say again, leave it to me. That's one of the best houses in Mayfair—I tell you it only wants doing up, and I know the people who'd do it up in double quick time. For a furnished house of that size and in that highly-desirable neighbourhood, as the house-agents put it, two thousand a year's a very modest rental."

"And you think they'd really give it?"

"For the third time I repeat—leave it to me. If I know anything, the deal can be done."

Lord Hartsdale looked narrowly at his sister. He laid down his gun, slowly filled and lighted a pipe, and glanced at her again.

"What's the game?" he asked.

"Game?" she repeated, assuming an air of innocence. "What game?"

"Rot! Your game. Of course, you've got a game on. Why else this sudden interest in these manufacturing people?"

"Well, never you mind, Hartsdale," she answered, turning her head. "You ought to be jolly thankful I can give you a turn. Now, are you in for letting that house or not?"

"Oh, of course I'd let it. Two thousand a year! Let them have it by all means—if you can."

"Very well. Now then, I want to ask them to lunch. Not the family—only George Ellington and his wife."

Lord Hartsdale dropped the particular part of his gun which he was just then cleaning and stared at his sister.

"Good heavens, Hilda, are you taking leave of your senses?" he exclaimed. "Ask them to lunch?—here!"

"Where else? We aren't in town," she answered. "Here—of course."

"Of course! Where do you propose to put them? Amongst the cobwebs and cockroaches of the vaulted dining-hall, *circa* somewhere-about-the-beginning-of-the-seventeenth-century, I suppose?" he said cynically. "Or, as it's summer, perhaps you'll lunch 'em under the spreading cedars of the pleasantly-neglected lawn?"

"Don't try to be funny, Hartsdale. Leave it to me. I'm not likely to do things in anything but the way they should be done."

"Don't know how you'll do it," he retorted, musingly. "We usually lunch off the scrag end of a neck of mutton, don't we? How will that suit these bloated plutocrats?"

"Once more—leave it to me—and to Mawsey. Any day, then?"

Lord Hartsdale laughed.

"Please yourself. And since you seem to be inclined to do things, you'd better provide Mawsey with a new black coat. We haven't any footmen in service at present, but I believe there are liveries somewhere, unless they've been sold to the farmers for scarecrows. However, as I say, please yourself. You—wish me to show up, of course? In view of a deal about the Curzon Street abode of woe and desolation—eh?"

"If you will only wash your hands, trim your beard, and find something else than that old tweed suit to wear. Of course, you'll show up—and you'll make yourself particularly amiable. Don't you forget that I shall persuade the Ellingtons to take the house for a term of years. And ready money will be uncommonly useful to you, Hartsdale—eh?"

Lord Hartsdale began putting the gun together.

"I only wish to heaven you could manage to pull off this thing in absolute privacy," he said. "If some of my creditors get to know that I'm raking in a couple of thousand a year in ready cash, they'll be on to me like a ton of bricks!"

"Well," said Hilda, "I'll consider that. Even that might be worked. Now I'm just going to talk to Mawsey about that lunch. How's the wine-cellar, Hartsdale?"

"Poor way. A fair amount of good claret—some of our famous port—plenty of whisky. No fizz—not a bottle in the house."

"Well—leave that to me, too," she said, rising. "I'll attend to everything, and—what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say," he answered slowly, "do you really think you'll bring this off? Letting the house, I mean. By gad, Hilda!—if you only could—if you only could——"

She looked at him interrogatively as he paused, and he gave her a queer, comical grin.

"I'd give anything to rattle a handful of sovereigns!" he concluded. "You mayn't think it, but there are times when poverty ceases to be even—genteel!"

CHAPTER VI

LETTERS

With her hand on the door Hilda paused and looked back at her brother. It was the first time for years that he had ever spoken to her with any real feeling, and she suddenly recognized that his carelessness, his untidiness, his hermit-life was all pretence.

"Oh!" she said. "So—that's where it is, Hartsdale? Sometimes I've wondered if you really did like to play Diogenes."

"What else is there to do?" he asked. "Everything's in such a confounded mess. What land there is is being let at starvation price—you're better off with your five hundred a year than I am. If we could only strike coal or oil or something under the park—or if I'd been brought up to a decent trade, now——"

"Do you think you use your opportunities?" she said quickly. "Perhaps you don't. Here's one anyway—don't neglect it!"

"Where?" he said, frowning. "Where?"

Hilda opened the door a little and laughed cynically.

"If one hasn't much money of one's own, Hartsdale," she said over her shoulder, "one should cultivate the society of people who have more than they know what to do with. These Ellingtons, my dear,

roll in money. And now I'm going to see Mawsey about that lunch."

But on her way she met Mawsey coming to find her. There were letters for her—two letters, and as she took them she noticed that one was from her husband in India and the other from Otto von Roon. It struck her that she never remembered receiving letters from both men at the same time, and she had a chilly feeling that in one letter or the other there was news which she did not want to hear. But she never allowed anything to interfere with the particular business of the moment, and she called Mawsey back as he was turning away.

"Mawsey, I was coming to find you," she said. "There is something to arrange. There are people coming to lunch in a day or two—two people. Young Mr. and Mrs. Ellington, of Ashminster, you know."

Mawsey, a privileged old servant who had been with the family years before either Lord Hartsdale or his sister saw the light, and who, with his wife and his two daughters, now formed the entire upper-servant staff of the whole establishment, screwed up his lips and instinctively rubbed his chin. Hilda smiled as she perceived the trend of his thoughts.

"There's nothing for you to bother about, Mawsey," she hastened to say. "You and I will settle about what's wanted—I'll give you a cheque. What I wished to arrange now is about the rooms."

Mawsey, standing in the big, deserted hall, looked round about him. There was scarcely a reception-room in the house that had been used for years—in some of them the shutters had been up so long that they were covered with cobwebs.

"It will take some time, ma'am," he began, doubtfully.

"No," said Hilda. "It needn't. They won't be here long—can't be, because of the election—Mr. Ellington will want to get away. I shall come in from Ashminster with them—I'll bring them to the garden entrance—we needn't pass through this part of the house at all. I thought that you might serve lunch in the Prince's Parlour—that can be put to rights in a few hours, surely, and it's so handsome—and the library next door is quite all right now."

Mawsey's face brightened. The Prince's Parlour, so called because a certain High Personage had once breakfasted in it one hunting morning, was a small room which could be swept and garnished promptly; it was moreover full of beautiful old furniture and pictures which would do credit to the family. And it opened into the library, another fine apartment which his lordship paid proper respect to.

"Leave it to me, ma'am," said Mawsey. "Everything shall be seen to at once. The plate is always in readiness. Er—we have no champagne in the house."

"I'll see to that, Mawsey," replied Hilda. "As to the rest, see me to-morrow after breakfast."

She carried the letters up to her room, still conscious of an intuitive feeling that one or other or both contained some news which she had no wish to hear. Sitting down in an open window-place which looked out over the tangle of park and wood beneath, she dropped them on her knee and gazed at them speculatively, contrasting the different styles of calligraphy. Otto von Roon wrote a great dashing hand,

heavy and thick, using up all the space he could get; Colonel Tressingham's handwriting was thin, neat, small, precise in every detail. Scarcely knowing what she did, she turned from the letters to photographs of their writers, standing, almost side by side, on a table close by. There was Von Roon, big, florid, assured almost to arrogance, smiling with the good humour of the man who loves to go through life easily and luxuriously. And there was the Colonel—tall, spare, grave—a courtly, old-fashioned looking gentleman of fifty, with the hair grown thin at his temples and many lines around his kindly eyes. At sight of his picture she began to wonder about many things, and to remember the fact that she was married to him.

Some people had wondered why Colonel Tressingham, at that time a bachelor of forty, had chosen for his wife a mere girl of eighteen. Other people had wondered why a girl of that age, a beauty, had married a man old enough to be her father. But Hilda herself had never had any doubts or wonders about the marriage. The Colonel had married her because he was madly in love with her. She had married him because she wanted to escape from Hartsdale Park and a drab life. She had never deceived herself about him. He was well off—or had been then—he was retiring from the Army; he would be able to show her something of the world and of its life. For a while she had got on very well both with him and with the new condition of things; they had travelled a good deal about Europe, and she had never been dull. Then it had become highly necessary for the Colonel to repair to India, where some years previously he had invested a very large amount

of money in a concern which was now needing supervision and enquiry; she had gone out with him there, and had found to her disgust that they would have to remain—if her husband's money was to be saved—for some years in a part of the country wherein there was little of interest and next to no society. She had borne it for a year or two; then she had come home, leaving Colonel Tressingham to struggle with his business until he could put right many things that had gone wrong. She had five hundred a year of her own; she had a similar amount from her husband. On this income she set herself up in a flat in Mayfair and began to amuse herself in her own way. And then she met Otto von Roon—and it was quite to her liking that her husband should remain in India as long as he pleased.

She picked up the letters at last, and after turning them over two or three times broke the seal of the Indian one. And from her first casual glance at the opening sentences she knew that her premonition of coming trouble had been well founded.

“I am writing this in great haste,” wrote Colonel Tressingham. “I want to catch this mail so that you may have this as soon as possible. I fear I have no very good news to give you. During the last few weeks I have been able to get a clearer idea as to how I really stand with regard to this confounded business. There is no doubt that the factory had been much more badly neglected than I had any idea of when we first came out here. Certainly things have improved since I was on the spot to keep an eye on matters, but I am afraid I must make up my mind to a loss of some sort.

“The position is this—and I want you to realize and consider it. By remaining here, say, another five or six years, I believe I could pull things quite round and get out with just about the same amount of money that I put into the business fifteen years ago. But (i) you object to returning to this place; and (ii) I have no great desire to remain here, working like a nigger, in uncongenial surroundings, for the time I have mentioned. In fact, the medical men tell me that another five years in Bengal will settle me.

“There is an alternative. Nicholson, whom I think you will remember, and who is, of course, twenty years my junior, has offered to buy me out. He will give me cash down, a lump sum for all my share and interest in the business—which sum represents just about one-half of what I originally put into it. This he would do at once—that is, if I accept his offer on hearing from you.

“So this is where it is—either I go home with what I have, freed of all further anxiety and certain as to a particular and assured income, but having lost a good deal, or I remain here against my will and with certain damage to my constitution in the effort to get back my original outlay. Which alternative am I to decide upon? It is a good deal in your hands.

“I want you to understand exactly what it means so far as the financial position is concerned. If I close up now and go home, I shall have fifteen hundred a year to live on. You, of course, have your five hundred—so we should have two thousand a year between us. My notion—my hope—is to find a quiet little place in the Midlands where we can get hunt-

ing, fishing, a bit of rough shooting. I ask for nothing better.

“But, on the other hand, I believe there is no doubt that if I stuck to things here for five years longer I should certainly get back every penny of my original capital and perhaps a little more. That would mean that we should have a yearly income of nearer four than two thousand.

“Tell me frankly what you think and wish. I do not like losing my money. If I were younger, if this place were—where it isn’t!—if it were not for health considerations—if one only had some decent and congenial society (I’ve scarcely exchanged word with a soul for some weeks!), above everything, if you were with me, I’d hang on to this like grim death until I’d worked everything to a successful issue. But I’m not as young as I was, and I want to go home, and I want—you. But, after all, the chief consideration is—what do *you* think? So tell me candidly. Shall I settle with Nicholson and return—to settle down on what I shall have left? I think we can manage very well on our two thousand a year. Tell me.”

Hilda slowly restored this letter to its cover and threw it and the other letter aside. She rose and walked straight to her writing-table, and indited the candid letter which her husband asked for. Candour is a cheap commodity; like politeness, it costs nothing, and it is easily dealt out to relations. Hilda dealt it out freely to this far-away husband.

First of all, she reminded him she had no great faith in the medical men he talked of. She thought she might be allowed to know something of his constitution after ten years’ acquaintance with it; she

saw no reason why another five years of India should ruin his health, especially considering that he was so temperate, so regular of habit, so wiry and fit. And—secondly—there was surely no need for him to remain in attendance on the factory every day and all days. So long as he was in the country and within call, surely he could go somewhere and amuse himself now and then. And certainly he should go to the Hills—why didn't he? And—thirdly—she had never said that she wouldn't return. Perhaps that could be arranged in a few months—next year, say. Couldn't they have a holiday together—at Simla, for instance, or during the season at Calcutta? Why not?

But—fourthly—wouldn't it be a very foolish thing, if, as he said, he was *certain* of getting all his original outlay back in five years to run away and leave so much of it behind him? After all, there was a mighty difference between an income of four thousand a year and a beggarly fifteen hundred. Let him not decide in a hurry. If her presence was the main thing—well, then, she must go out to him.

But she smiled to herself at that thought, as she licked up the envelope in which this wifely epistle was enclosed. Time—that was the thing she wanted to gain. It was not convenient to have Colonel Tressingham returning to England just then—not at all convenient.

She went back to the window presently and picked up the letter from Otto von Roon, opening it slowly. She was not sure of her anticipation in regard to it. She unfolded the big sheet and found nothing but a

mere line scrawled in Otto's giant handwriting across a waste of paper. It was nothing but a hasty message:

“Come back to town as soon as that election is over.—O. v R.”

CHAPTER VII

MESHES OF THE NET

There was no difficulty about getting young Mr. and Mrs. Ellington over to lunch at Hartsdale Park. Before they had known her a week George and Letty Ellington had yielded themselves to Hilda Tressingham's influence. Ellington considered her a remarkably smart, clever woman; she had worked almost night and day on his behalf, never tiring, never sparing herself, and he felt properly grateful to her. Letty, on her part, looked up to her with the placid admiration which a certain type of simplicity always feels for a certain sort of dashing cleverness. Hilda's suggestions about the election campaign, her untiring energy, her way with the voters seemed to her wonderful. She began to contrast her with Marcia, whom until then she had believed to be of an unapproachable superiority in most matters. She made some comment in relation to that contrast to Ellington. Ellington indulged himself in a terse summing-up of the two women.

"Marcia," he said, "is a woman of abstractions; Mrs. Tressingham is a woman of affairs."

He thought this quite smart, a veritable epigram of the first water, and allowed himself to laugh at it; but it irked him a little to notice that Letty received

it with a blank smile. Of Letty, however, he expected little that was intellectual.

"She's been most tremendously useful, Mrs. Tressingham," he went on. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if I don't owe the election to her in the end. Crashaw has been scared to death about some of the voters, and I know for a fact that she's practically secured several of the wobblers—if only the beggars'll vote according to their promises. We'll certainly go there to lunch, Letty. Crashaw will kick up a row if I'm off the scene for even an hour, but it won't take many minutes to run over to Hartsdale Park. And, by the by—you know what I said to you the other day about getting a town house?"

"Yes," answered Letty, conscious of a secret between herself and their new friend. "I remember, George."

"Well, of course we must have one—now. It's a sheer necessity," said Ellington. "I can't run backwards and forwards between here and London as I have been doing. It was all very well for my father—he was never in office, and private members can be spared. But I must be on the spot, always, during the session, and—well, we'll have to get a house, and at once. And Mrs. Tressingham happened to mention that her brother wants to let his town house. It's in Curzon Street. It's the old family mansion—a fine old house, she says, with beautiful furniture. And the rent's only forty pounds a week," concluded Ellington, who, Letty being a moneyed woman, considered that to be the pleasantest way of saying that the rent was two thousand a year. "I—I think I shall speak to

Lord Hartsdale about it when we lunch there—eh?”

“I suppose we must have a town house—now,” said Letty. “But—what will your father say?”

Ellington shrugged his shoulders, secure in his own consciousness of his partnership in the great business that was carried on in the wide-spreading factories which lay in the valley before his windows.

“Can’t help what my father says,” he answered. “It’s our concern—not his. We shall pay for it—he won’t. And I’m tired of that beastly flat in Queen Anne’s Mansions. Like a house in Mayfair, eh, Letty?”

Letty, with proper feminine feeling, replied that she should like anything that George liked, and it would certainly be much nicer to live together in London than to feel that she was in one place and he in another.

“I’ll certainly speak to Hartsdale about it,” said Ellington. “From what Mrs. Tressingham tells me, it’s the sort of house one would like to live in, and we may as well take the chance of it.”

Then he laughed, as at some thought of his own, and Letty looked enquiringly at him.

“I believe Hartsdale will be glad to let it,” he said, answering her look. “From all one hears he’s as poor as a crow—otherwise I don’t believe we’d get a house just there at that price. Why, don’t you remember those American people—Mrs. Trout-Salmon and her daughters—that we met in Paris? They paid seventy-five pounds a week for Lord Dilkesby’s house in Upper Brook Street. Um!—I think Hartsdale will no doubt be really glad to find a tenant—it’ll put some ready money in his scantily-lined pockets.”

“But is he really so poor?” asked Letty innocently. “A peer?”

“Pooh!” laughed Ellington. “Peers! I could buy up a couple of dozen of peers and give them away. Hartsdale’s awfully poor.”

Yet it seemed to the ingenuous Letty that there was no great evidence of awful poverty at Hartsdale Park, when she and Ellington were taken there by Mrs. Tressingham. Hilda carefully piloted them through the Dutch garden—always kept in a state of perfection, because Hartsdale had a fancy for it; a side-entrance took them at once into the Prince’s Parlour, where lunch was immediately served. Now, the Prince’s Parlour was a room of rooms—panelled in magnificent old oak from floor to ceiling, containing beautiful old furniture and just the right number of fine pictures. The light that came in through a great lancet window fell on nothing that was not ancient and good and of that indefinable atmosphere which is only encountered in the old houses and castles of a long-ancestried family. Young Mrs. Ellington was no fool, and she could use her eyes, and she knew at once the difference which existed between her surroundings at Hartsdale Park and the newness of “Ashcroft” and “Oakcroft,” and something within her said, “We have only just begun, but these people have been where they are for ages and ages!” No, she failed to see the evidences of poverty in the perfectly-cooked food, the choice wines, the old silver plate, the perfect appurtenances. Their own butler, at home, she felt convinced, could never attain to the pontifical dignity of Mawsey; their own domestic machinery never run on such smoothly-oiled,

carefully-hidden wheels as this, which had been schooled and practised for centuries. And in the deep recesses of her simple little mind Letty informed herself that even if her George and his father made a few more millions it would be a long time before they arrived at what the Prince's Parlour in Hartsdale Park was a symbol of—aristocracy.

It pleased Letty greatly to see how Ellington and his host got on; as she had had small experience of peers of the realm, it surprised her to find that Lord Hartsdale was a very free and easy young man; a little cynical, perhaps, but remarkably amiable and friendly. And she was glad when, as she and Mrs. Tressingham and Ellington were hastening back to Ashminster once more to plunge into the fray, George turned to their companion and told her that he had spoken to Lord Hartsdale about the town house.

"I am quite willing to take it over," he added. "I—I suppose it will need some renovation?"

"It can be ready in a month from any given date," answered Hilda. "Leave it to me—I live close by it, and as I'm going to town at once, I'll see to everything."

"You are without doubt a woman of affairs," laughed Ellington, and again recalled his epigram, reflecting that such women were certainly to be preferred to those who, like Marcia, lived in close touch with theories and abstractions. That evening, however, happening to call at his father's house and finding his sister alone, he found that Marcia sometimes condescended to particulars.

"You appear to have developed a sudden passion

for this Mrs. Tressingham, George," observed Marcia sweetly; "shared in, I observe, by poor Letty."

There was no great amount of love lost between George and Marcia; the brother regarded the sister as an irritating theorist who could make herself remarkably unpleasant; the sister considered the brother as an opportunist who, in common with all time-serving politicians, hindered the march of true progress. Consequently, they now glared at each other.

"Why do you speak of my wife as poor Letty?" demanded Ellington.

"A mere figure of speech," returned his sister "Just as I might speak of you as poor George."

"As you probably do—behind my back."

"Very likely. I think you're very gullible."

"Do you. And who, pray, is gulling me?"

Marcia laughed, in a fashion that always made George Ellington want to swear aloud.

"Don't you think this Mrs. Tressingham is suddenly very zealous on your behalf?" she said. "None of her family—such as it is—ever showed any great desire either to share in the political affairs of Ashminster or to cultivate our society, before now. I think the lady wants to get something out of you, George."

"It is just like you to think so, Marcia," answered Ellington. "But do you expect to get something out of the long-haired, dirty-collared lot you are always helping?"

"No—because there's nothing to get out of them. But now—now that you're a member of the Government—a very small member, of course—people may

get something out of you. I should imagine Mrs. Tressingham is after something. Hypatia Standish, who was here to see me yesterday, knows something of her. She says she's fast."

"Fast?"

"Belongs to a queerish set in town, anyhow," said Marcia, with relish. "And if you want to know more, Richard Avory, who was at your house with me to lunch that day you brought her in, asked me a queer question about her."

"I shouldn't wonder! He looked the sort of chap who would ask queer questions about his fellow-guests."

"Richard Avory," continued Marcia imperturbably, "is a very clever young man. Being a barrister he naturally hears a great deal. He asked me if that was the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham who was mixed up, a year or two ago, with some turf case in which somebody tried to swindle a bookmaker."

"Indeed! And you told him——"

"I told him that as all my knowledge of the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham was that she'd always been connected in my mind with dogs and horses, I should say it was. And, of course, it was, because there isn't any other Honourable Mrs. Tressingham—*vide* the Peerage, brother George."

"I'm not in the habit of consulting the Peerage. What a snob you are, Marcia! On the platform you're always running the aristocracy down, and I verily believe you know Debrett by heart!"

"That's so that I may know all about the natural enemies of the people. I like to trace them back to the thieves and murderers they all sprang from."

Oh, no, I'm not a snob, George—I leave that to you and Letty. Confess now, aren't you both fearfully elated because you've been to lunch at Hartsdale Park?"

"I'll confess that I'm ashamed of your rude manners," retorted Ellington.

And he went away, angry because he saw that Marcia was laughing at him. He hated to be laughed at; to know that any one ridiculed him let him down in his own estimation; and he loved to keep that at a high mark. It was nonsense, he said to himself, that Marcia or anybody else should imagine that Hilda Tressingham had taken a sudden hold on him. The truth, he assured himself several times over, was that he recognized in her a very smart and clever and attractive woman, and that he was very grateful to her for the way in which she had come forward to work for him.

He had more reason to be grateful on the day of the election. Hilda was in the town before nine o'clock in the morning: she never stayed her endeavour to get the free and enlightened electors to the polling-booths and to induce them to vote for Ellington until eight o'clock in the evening came. It was only then that she could be induced to sit down and eat and drink. And she would do little of either, for the exciting time was at hand, and Crashaw was white and trembling and George Ellington in a state of high tension. At ten o'clock they knew the definite result—the new Civil Lord was re-elected by the narrow majority of eleven.

"I've you to thank for it and no one else!" whispered Ellington with fervour, as he put Hilda into

her motor two hours later. "Crashaw says so, and Crashaw never says a thing unless he knows it. And I can't thank you properly now. When may I come—and where?"

"I'm going back to town to-morrow," she answered hurriedly. "Come and dine with me next Wednesday. I'll send you a card to the House. Then I can tell you all about this Curzon Street place. I'm so glad you've won—now go in—and go to bed."

She flashed a bright smile on him as she drove off from the gate of "Oakcroft," and George Ellington suddenly found himself wishing that next Wednesday were to-morrow.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AMARANTH CLUB

When Hilda Tressingham came home from India, leaving her Colonel to wrestle unaided with his indigo factory, she spent a good deal of her time on the way in carefully considering how and where she was going to spend her immediate future. As to the how she was not in any great doubt—she knew pretty well what she meant to do with herself. There was not going to be any grass-widow retreat to Brighton or Bournemouth, Harrogate or Cheltenham, or to any of the dismal places in which ladies whose husbands are on the other side of the world are supposed to spend their time until their spouses return. She was not going to share Hartsdale's hermit-like life at Hartsdale, nor, however much he wished it, preside over the house in Curzon Street. There was a distinctly Bohemian vein in her nature, resultant upon a distinct resolve of dead and gone ancestors to do exactly what they like and when and where they liked, and she meant to live in London after a truly bachelor fashion. If ever and whenever the Colonel returned, new arrangements would have to be made, no doubt—he would want a house and a settled establishment. But as for herself she was going to be saddled with as few impedimenta as possible, and she decided

upon a mere *pied-à-terre*, with as few encumbrances as possible.

In spite of her Bohemianism, Hilda possessed a very keen sense of the value and significance of money. She knew precisely what her income was: five hundred a year of her own; five hundred from her husband. She had no idea of laying out a big lump of the annual thousand in rent and service. Of an essentially self-helpful and managing nature, she was not hourly dependent upon servants' help, and in the life she meant to live she had no desire to have even a maid always on the other side of a closed door. Her conception, then, shaped itself into the form of a small flat of which she could be absolute mistress. She could make her own breakfast, which was never more than a cup of coffee, a biscuit or two, and a bit of fruit; she could lunch and dine out. If there was ever the necessity to give a very small dinner to any one particular person she could have that dinner supplied from the best kitchen of the many good ones around Piccadilly. The only thing she bound herself to was to locate herself in Mayfair. She had reasons for that which were best known to herself.

After much searching about, Hilda found exactly what she wanted in a block of buildings in Down Street: a small flat of five rooms which she had the great good luck to get cheap as dirt—speaking comparatively. The flat had recently been decorated and was bright, light, and smart. Foreseeing certain eventualities Hilda had brought with her from India a consignment of carpets which she had persuaded her husband to buy in the bazaars. She fitted the flat with them. Then the flat needed properly fur-

nishing; Hilda had no intention of spending a penny on that part of the business. There was Hartsdale's town house round the corner in Curzon Street, full of beautiful old stuff, Chippendale, Epplewaite, Sheraton—so full, indeed, that she could take out of it what would furnish her five rooms without any noticeable alteration being made in it. Hartsdale made no objection; he bade her help herself. She pointed out to him that whenever he came to town he could come and put up in Down Street. Then she carefully made her selection, choosing the very best of what she wanted, and the result was as charming a small flat as London could show. She had everything she wanted from the Curzon Street house: plate, linen, glass, china, pictures. It was easy then to arrange for domestic needs; easy to secure the services of a day-maid who could be packed off at a moment's notice. The sum and result of all was that Mrs. Tressingham possessed a most desirable domicile of her own in town in which she was absolutely free of all trammels, in which she could do exactly what she pleased, in which there were no servants always on the spot to spy and listen, and which she could go in and out of at all hours of the day and night, and lock up for a week, or a month, or a year, according to her own sweet will.

In this retired and luxurious nest, however, its occupant made no long stay on her return to it after a short month's absence. That absence had been necessitated by a certain monetary transaction with a certain Mr. Isidore Bernstein, who had not behaved to himself as well in the affair as he had been expected to. But Mr. Bernstein had now been cleared out of

the way through the friendly offices of Otto von Roon, and Hilda Tressingham breathed the air of liberty when, on the evening following George Ellington's re-election, she stepped out of the train and caught the faint odour of that particular atmosphere which always hangs about Euston. Having ideas of her own for her disposal of herself for that evening, she went into the hotel and dined before driving to Down Street. She dined lazily, leisurely, watching the folk about her, her busy brain speculating on many matters; she lingered a long time over her coffee and her favourite liqueur. It was growing late when she finally reached her flat—or, to be exact, it was at an hour which most respectable people would have called late. But to Hilda that hour was the threshold of the night, and she had many things to do before the sun rose again over London.

She stayed no longer in the flat than was necessary to assure herself that all was in order, according to the instructions which she had wired on the previous day, and to change from her travelling things into a quiet and unobtrusive evening gown. It was just upon eleven o'clock when she enveloped herself in a wrap, and going down to the street entrance told the hall-porter to get her a taxi-cab. The man was used to these nightly settings-out; it required no more than a nod from Mrs. Tressingham to ensure his giving a brief instruction to the driver: "Amaranth Club."

Hilda leaned back in her cab as it moved swiftly along Piccadilly, letting her eyes rest with pleasure on the lights and the shadows, her ears drink in the multitude of sounds. For her the silences of Hartsdale had no charm; she preferred the glare of an elec-

tric standard on an adamant pavement to a clear patch of moonlight on a fern-strewn glade. The sight of men and women on London sidewalks stirred her blood. She laughed as she thought of the dreary dullness of her brother's house and the shabby drabness of that corner of Ashminster in which she had so recently been fishing for votes for George Ellington. Time spent out of London was to her time literally thrown away. She anathematized Mr. Isidore Bernstein sincerely and heartily for having driven her away from her usual haunts.

But here she was, back at one of them, at any rate, and she entered it with the zest of a devotee who has been banished for a while from a favourite shrine of his adoration. On the previous night, at exactly the same hour, she had entered the old hall at Hartsdale Park. Now she passed the portals of a quiet-looking house, which, for all there was to learn to the contrary from its exterior, might have been as dull and dreary as Hartsdale itself. Only those who like herself penetrated through the outposts of this eminently respectable building knew anything at all about it.

The Amaranth Club, whose house was in one of the quietest streets in the St. James's district, was one of those essentially modern institutions which have come into being of very late years. It was a proprietary club, and its proprietor, Mr. Barthelemy, was regarded as a benefactor—a private benefactor—by those ladies and gentlemen who had the privilege of his acquaintance. It occurred to the master mind of Mr. Barthelemy that, in view of the absurd restrictions of the English licensing laws, it was impossible for people so minded to eat supper in peace and com-

fort after the theatre at any place controlled by those laws. Why not, then, found a club for a very, very select and special *coterie* of folk who desired to be able to please themselves between the hours of, say, eleven o'clock at night and two o'clock in the morning? It was perfectly easy to do this: Mr. Barthelemy did it. As proprietor of a West End theatre, as financier of various theatrical ventures at one time or another, he knew exactly how to get a certain membership of the desired sort together. He also knew how to be extremely rigid as to the character, capabilities, and financial standing of the people who came within that membership. Mr. Barthelemy always kept one strict rule before him in all he did in connection with the Amaranth—Absolute Outward Respectability. He wanted no young bloods, no dashing boys about town, nobody who might exceed in anything. He desired the semblance of the ultra-refined. And when a man who knows London knows what he wants, he generally gets it. Mr. Barthelemy knew London, and he got what he wanted.

It would have been impossible to say a word against the Amaranth Club; impossible for the most lynx-eyed spy—if such could have got in—to lay a finger on anything in connection with it and say this is an evasion of the law. Mr. Barthelemy was a man of infinite painstaking where particulars were concerned. The name of his club, the object of his club, the address of his club, his own name as secretary and proprietor, were all duly registered. The authorities who were entitled to be in possession of such particulars knew how many members there were, what the rules were as to the election of members, what the terms

of subscription were, what the entrance fee was, what the hours during which the premises were open were, and how and in what fashion the rules could be altered. Mr. Barthelemy saw to it that everything in connection with the Amaranth was strictly *en regle*. Nobody—nobody—should ever be able to breathe a word against the Amaranth.

And Mr. Barthelemy saw to it, also, that his members—that small and select *coterie* of which he personally knew every unit—should possess the most comfortable and luxurious club—small though it was—in London. The old mansion in which it was housed he altered, renovated, arranged and decorated in such a fashion as to give delight to every man and woman—for the Amaranth was designedly a club of mixed membership—who used them. Supper-rooms, smoking-rooms, billiard-rooms, reading-rooms, conversation-rooms, lounges, bars—all were perfect in their way. There was such an atmosphere of elegance and refinement pervading the Amaranth that it would have been strange to find anything but elegance and refinement amongst its members. They were, in truth, a very choice set—and in every respect were closely akin to those Lucanians who made the name of Sybaris a byword for all ages.

It was early times yet for the Amaranth—its rooms as a rule began to fill about midnight. Hilda went straight to a certain corner of a smoking-room common to both sexes—there was a nook there which she favoured. On her way she encountered Mr. Barthelemy and had a little conversation with him. Mr. Barthelemy expressed his great delight at seeing her once more. Was it, then, but one short month that

she had been away from the Amaranth? Truly, it had seemed an age!

She took Mr. Barthelemy's compliments for what she estimated their worth to be, and collecting certain newspapers, made herself comfortable in an easy-chair and drew out her cigarette case. There was a good deal in the newspapers about the Ashminster bye-election; her own name was mentioned as one of Mr. George Ellington's workers. And, apropos of the election, there were speculations in the Opposition journals as to how long the Government would last. There seemed to be a prevalent notion that it would not last very long—whether the wish was father to the thought or not, one of the Opposition journals, usually well-informed, prophesied that the Prime Minister's resignation would be in the hands of his Sovereign before Christmas. Hilda began to wonder how Otto von Roon's scheme—whatever it might be—in relation to George Ellington would be affected by a change of Government.

She was expecting Von Roon to join her at any moment, and from time to time she kept looking round at the heavily-portièred door, through which she knew he must come. And once thus looking up she saw a man lift the curtain aside and for a second glance into the room as if in search of some one. The room was but dimly lighted in the corner in which the door stood and the man was evidently short-sighted, and peered about him through spectacles. He showed no sign of seeing Hilda, but Hilda saw him and recognized him after a sharp effort of memory. He was the young, legal-looking man whom she had met at lunch at George Ellington's house just a week pre-

viously—the man who had seemed to be attached to Marcia Ellington's skirts, politically at any rate, and whom Hilda had taken to be possibly attached, or desirous of being attached, to Marcia in another way. She remembered his name now—a Mr. Ivory.

She was wondering what any friend of Marcia Ellington's could be doing in the Amaranth when Von Roon came quietly into the room and dropped into a chair at her side.

CHAPTER IX

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

For a moment these two looked at each other silently, each smiling a little. Von Roon produced a cigar-case, and, selecting a cigar, lighted it with due deliberation. When it was burning to his satisfaction he turned to his companion.

"Well?" he said. "So things came to a successful issue. The young man was again a winner."

Hilda laughed.

"By the shortest of short heads," she remarked.

"Never mind. So long as he had his nose past the post a little way in front of the other fellow it sufficed—for our purpose, anyway."

"That is just what I want more information about," said Hilda, edging her chair a little nearer to Von Roon's. "Our purpose? What is our purpose? I should think you made your purpose."

"No—you came in. Greatly to your advantage, also. But more of that later. Now about the early stages of your campaign. You saw much of these people?"

"A lot. Quite enough."

"Well? Describe them. Analyse them. Tell me about them—all, any of them."

Hilda looked round her. She was still wondering what Richard Ivory was doing in the Amaranth,

and she had no wish that he should overhear her mentioning Ashminster nor the Ellington family. But she knew from well-proved experience that the corner in which she and Von Roon sat was safe in every way, and she went on in low, even tones.

"Well, then—the man first. I think he is the sort that I can do anything with. That is, given time and opportunity. You do not want anything doing in a great hurry?"

"No. There is no hurry. You shall have time—the opportunities you are quite capable of creating for yourself, now that you know him."

Hilda put a finger on one of the newspapers which lay on the table before them.

"But, perhaps you don't know? They say the Government can't last—that it will be out before the end of the year."

Von Roon smiled—knowingly.

"It is the privilege of newspapers to imagine knowledge," he said. "The Government will not go out. It will last precisely sixteen months from now. Abundance of time, for our purposes. Proceed; the rest, now?"

"Well, the wife is worth looking after. I see great possibilities of getting at him through her. She has already taken a great fancy to me."

"Good, good! It is excellent—splendid! Cultivate her for all she is worth. There is no better way of getting a hold over a man than through his wife. But now—the young man's relations? The father—he, too, was a member of Parliament once upon a time. You met him?"

"Of course. He is a good type of the old-fashioned

plutoerat—priggish, pragmatical, purse-proud, narrow—Radical in all sorts of ways. The sister is a fool, one of the new super-women lot. The young people must be got away from the old influences.”

“Yes. How, then?”

“I have made a beginning. I have let them my brother’s house in Curzon Street. I thought it might be difficult, but it was easy. So, I shall have them both under my thumb—at any rate, under my nose.”

“Again good. You have done excellently.”

Hilda threw away her cigarette. She gave Von Roon a keen glance.

“Very well, then, I want to know the purpose,” she said. “I’m not going to take a hand in any game unless I know what game it is.”

Von Roon got slowly out of his chair. He bent over the table.

“Come next door in ten minutes from now,” he whispered. “Come to the small cabinet. Then, you shall hear everything. Till then——”

He turned and lounged carelessly off through the rooms beyond; Hilda heard him laughing and talking to some man whom he met. They went away together; she remained where she was for several minutes; then she, too, left the room. And passing along a corridor outside she turned up a flight of stairs, the entrance to which was hid by a curtain. At the head of these stairs was a narrow, dimly-lighted passage; she traversed this until she came to another curtain behind which, after a swift glance around her, she rapidly passed. It was all darkness behind that curtain, but her hand felt for, and instantly found, a

spring catch, the presence of which no one would have observed, however closely they might have looked; another second, and she had glided through a narrow opening. She was no longer in the Amaranth Club, but in the house next door.

She paused for a moment after carefully closing the secret panel through which she had entered—a panel of such exquisitely-finished mechanism that it opened and closed without the slightest sound—and stood listening. Everything in that upper region of the house she had entered was silent, as silent as the loneliest stretches of Hartsdale Park at midnight—more silent, for there the night winds always murmured; here, in spite of the fact that she was standing at the very heart of London, there was the stillness of the grave. The darkness, too, was as profound as the silence—but to Hilda neither silence nor darkness mattered. No mole knew the ins and outs of its subterranean fastness better than she knew the twists and turns of the place she was in.

She moved forward at last, with as sure a step as if her surroundings had been brilliantly lighted. Her hand found the rail of a stair; she went swiftly down, as swiftly along a softly-carpeted passage which led away from its foot. At the end of a dozen paces she turned the handle of a door on her right hand; she closed the door behind her and quickly switched on an electric light. The light revealed a small room, having in its centre a small table furnished with a plenitude of writing materials. There were three or four elbow-chairs around the table; on one wall was an elaborate map of London; in a revolving bookcase

were several works of reference—dictionaries, peerages, baronetages, court guides; beyond these things the room contained nothing.

Hilda dropped into one of the elbow-chairs and waited. This room, too, was quiet as the places she had traversed in reaching it—it might have been a sound-proof, fire-proof, steel-walled vault in the underground regions of a Lombard Street bank. She heard no sound prefacing the entrance of Von Roon; the door opened noiselessly to admit him. And behind him Hilda saw the bland countenance of Mr. Barthelemy.

The two men advanced to the table and drew up chairs to it. Barthelemy rested his hands on the edge of the table, joined the tips of his fingers together, and looked over the rims of his spectacles first at Hilda, then at Von Roon. And Von Roon at once plunged into the business of the moment.

“Very well, then,” he said. “Now we talk.” He glanced at Hilda. “You may have concluded,” he continued, “seeing that he is present, that Mr. Barthelemy is with me—with us—in this affair. He and I are—co-speculators in it. You are now to come in. Mr. Barthelemy”—he turned to the proprietor of the Amaranth—“Mr. Barthelemy is already acquainted with what you have done at Ashminster, at my suggestion and on my instructions. Mr. Barthelemy approves.”

Mr. Barthelemy nodded his great head and tapped his fingers together.

“Excellent, excellent!” he said unctuously. “A very nice beginning—nothing could have been better. I congratulate Mrs. Tressingham heartily.”

Hilda nodded her acknowledgments. Then she turned sharply on Von Roon.

"Come!" she said. "What is it? The scheme."

Von Roon smiled, and drew his chair nearer to the table.

"Yes," he said, "the scheme. It is a very simple thing—in idea, and to tell. Listen, then. This young Mr. Ellington has been appointed Civil Lord of the Admiralty. He will accordingly come into possession of all the secrets of the Admiralty. He is, therefore, a person to know. Now—you know him. Eh?"

"And," said Barthelemy, watching Hilda closely, "Mrs. Tressingham will no doubt make it her business to know him better—much better."

Hilda gave Barthelemy a look and turned to Von Roon.

"What do you want?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

"This," answered Von Roon. "There will shortly be in existence, on paper, for very secret circulation only amongst those of the Government who are particularly interested in it, a scheme for an important—a most important—development in the future arrangements of the British Navy. It is so important that, to possess knowledge of it, those for whom we—Mr. Barthelemy and myself—are acting, will pay a great price. Naturally, this young man will be in possession of the papers relating to this scheme. And"—he paused for a moment and looked keenly at Hilda—"we must have them. Even if it be but for an hour, we must have them! You understand?"

Hilda made no immediate answer. Instead, she

stretched her hand across the table and picked up a cigarette from an open case which Barthelemy had laid down before him. The club proprietor hastened to supply her with a match.

"Now," she said, after she had smoked the cigarette half way through, during which time the two men watched her silently. "When is this paper likely to be in this man's hands?"

"Probably about the middle of the coming November," replied Von Roon with promptitude.

"You can tell that to a week?"

"To a week—yes."

"But, how shall I know when he is in possession of it? It is not a thing that will be announced in the newspapers," remarked Hilda.

Von Roon smiled.

"We shall be able to tell you the exact moment when it is in his possession," he answered. "We have many sources of information. But, there is no way of getting that paper so likely as through—you."

"You realize that it will not be an easy matter," observed Hilda.

"We realize that it will not be at all an easy matter," replied Von Roon.

"Then perhaps you have some suggestions to make as to how I am to do it?" she said. "Tell me them."

But Von Roon shook his head with a smile, and Barthelemy spread out his plump fingers.

"No!" said Von Roon. "As to the method and manner, we would rather leave that to you. As a woman, you will have no difficulty in evolving your own scheme. Pursue your own plans—it is better."

"Far better," agreed Barthelemy. "Unaided."

"Very well," said Hilda, after a pause. "Very well. I shall do my best. And now, what do I get?"

The question was prompt; Von Roon's answer came as promptly.

"Place that paper in my hands for one hour, and you shall have five thousand pounds," he said.

"Cash," supplemented Barthelemy. "Cash!"

Hilda nodded without speaking. Presently she rose. The two men rose with her.

"That is all—just now," said Barthelemy, looking at Von Roon.

"All!" answered Von Roon. "For the present."

They moved towards the door, but Hilda suddenly paused.

"A moment," she said. "Mr. Barthelemy, on my return to-night I noticed a new member of the club. A man, Mr. Richard Ivory. Now, I want to know who he is? Do you?"

Barthelemy, lifting a hand to the door, paused in the action, looking wonderingly at Hilda.

"Mr. Richard Ivory?" he said. "Why, yes, I know him. Of course, I know everyone who joins the Amaranth. You, too, then, know him?"

"I have met him once. Under circumstances which made it surprising to me to meet him—here."

Barthelemy stared at her; then at Von Roon. And Hilda went on:

"I met this Mr. Ivory at the Ellingtons at lunch. He seemed to me to be—well, in pursuit of Miss Marcia Ellington. Now, they are so very Puritanical and priggish that——"

Barthelemy laughed, waving a hand.

"Ah, my dear madam, the young man is in pur-

suit of this young lady's fortune!" he said. "I know all about that little matter. Reassure yourself, Mr. Avory has been known to me for some time. He is—all right."

"Oh!" said Hilda, taken aback. "Well, I only thought that it might be a little awkward for me, as things are, to be meeting Miss Ellington's young man at the Amaranth. You see?"

Barthélemy waved his hand again.

"It is all right—all right!" he said. "Reassure yourself, then, my dear lady. I know all the frequenters of the Amaranth. And now"—he looked at his companions—"a little play, perhaps an hour, eh?"

CHAPTER X

HEREDITARY PASSION

For a moment these three people, all concerned with each other in more than one venture, yet conscious that each had ventures which were peculiarly their own individual affairs, eyed one another narrowly. Mr. Barthelemy looked at his two companions as a highly respectable spider might be supposed to regard two eligible flies for whom he entertains a wish that they could be transformed into members of his own species. Von Roon regarded Hilda with a certain anxiety—the sort of anxiety that one sometimes sees in the eyes of an older and more experienced player of a game who is put in charge of a tyro of whom he has hopes, but whom he considers to be a little raw and more than a little rash. As for Hilda, she stood for a second or two drumming her slender fingers on the table from which they had just risen; when she looked up it was to give Mr. Barthelemy a quick, curious glance in which there was a certain element of suspicion.

“Before I say anything about that, Mr. Barthelemy,” she said, “I’m going to ask you a question and I expect a straight answer. Is Isidore Bernstein still coming here?”

Mr. Barthelemy glanced at Von Roon and smiled. It was a smile of knowledge and understanding, and

a swift one; he turned and transferred it to Hilda, but in the mere act of turning it became transformed and showed itself to her as a fatherly and almost protecting smile: a smile that would have done credit to a patriarch.

"My dear lady!" said Mr. Barthelemy, "you have been out of town. Consequently you have not heard the news."

"Having had little else to do," retorted Hilda, "I have read the *Times* and the *Morning Post* from the front page to the last every day—every scrap of them."

Mr. Barthelemy again smiled.

"The news to which I refer," he observed, "is not of the sort that appears in either of those eminent newspapers. Mr. Isidore Bernstein is not of sufficient importance to interest their readers, though he might have been of interest to one or two like yourself."

"Well?" asked Hilda impatiently. "What of him?"

"He has left London," replied Mr. Barthelemy. "It is supposed that he has departed to—wherever he came from. Our good friend Mr. Von Roon can corroborate me."

Hilda turned to Von Roon, who nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "that's true, but I did not know of it until yesterday. Besides, he holds nothing of yours now," he added with a significant look at Hilda.

"That's not the point," she said. "What I was going to say was that I will not play at any table where that man is. He cheated me. Though I couldn't prove it, I know he cheated me."

Mr. Barthelemy lifted his white hands as if in pious horror, looking like some grave and reverend man who has just heard heresy spoken.

"My dear lady!" he exclaimed softly. "No one ever cheats—dreadful word!—in my little *salle de jeu*. However, the man in question is—disappeared. For good. Eh, Mr. Von Roon?"

"For good," repeated Von Roon. "Er—for his own good."

Hilda made no immediate remark, and Mr. Barthelemy moved towards the door, sighing gently.

"We shall go down, then?" he said, glancing back. "There are a few nice companions to-night."

Von Roon motioned to him to leave them.

"Presently," he said, with a meaning nod. "Presently."

Mr. Barthelemy glided from the room with a sylph-like grace that was surprising in a man of his size, and Von Roon, perching himself on the table, looked at Hilda.

"A little precept and example," he said, smiling. "You have had some weeks of rustication in which to reflect. I hope the reflections have been good. But whether or not, I want you to listen to me for a moment. In fact, you must listen."

He pointed, rather authoritatively, to a chair in front of him, and Hilda, with a shrug of her shoulders, took it and looked at him as a child looks who knows it is going to be lectured.

"To begin with," said Von Roon, "you know very well that you are a gambler. It is in your blood."

"It would be a queer thing if it were not, considering the family history!" she muttered rather bit-

terly. "We've all been gamblers—for generations."

"Just so. But there are gamblers and gamblers," he continued. "There is the gambler who is reckless, rash, who gets into a perfect fever, who becomes obsessed, who never knows when to stop, and who, in the end, is ruined. That's—you. And there is the gambler who is calm, cool, determined, who is always master of himself, who knows when to tempt fortune no longer at a particular hour or moment, and who, consequently, wins. That's——"

"You!" she broke in, with a slightly contemptuous laugh. "You, of course! But I'm not quite so cool and calculating as Otto von Roon, my friend—our genealogies were—a little different."

"It would be better for you if you were more calculating and were far cooler," he said quietly. "Take my advice—if you're going to begin playing again, just remember that it is much pleasanter to win than it is to lose. Look at me—never has there been a year in which I have not found myself to the good at the end. Sometimes I have won moderately, sometimes I have won greatly, now and then I have won but a little. But I have never been on the wrong side to the amount of a penny."

"Luck!" she muttered. "Sheer luck!"

"No, nothing of the sort," he retorted. "Good management. Let me give you some simple rules. Remember that your object is to win; not to lose. Play to win. If you find that you're not winning at any particular sitting, stop——"

"Just when your luck's about to turn!" she sneered.

"I am pointing to myself as an excellent example," he said, with earnestness. "Be guided by me, Hilda.

Have a try at it. It's foolish on your part to sit up all night until your head's splitting, your nerves all unstrung, and your complexion ruined, all in expectation of something turning up which won't turn up that time! Try short sittings, and keep as cold as the Polar ice. If you find your luck's out that night, stop. And don't try such foolish ventures as you did with Bernstein. Also,"—he bent forward and gave her a searching look—"also, don't forget that the promissory note which was Bernstein's is now—mine."

Hilda rose impatiently.

"I knew you'd remind me of that," she said. "Of course, I'm in your debt, and therefore, I suppose, in your power, but I don't mean to be always so. If I earn that five thousand——"

"Yes?" he said, smiling. "And, what then?"

"I'll pay you off," she answered.

Von Roon laughed, and, leaving his seat on the table, made for the door.

"Come!" he said. "We'll try our luck for an hour or two. But—remember my good counsel."

He switched off the electric light as he spoke and they left the room in darkness. The corridor outside was also in darkness, but to these two habitués of Mr. Barthelémy's ingeniously-arranged and contrived dwelling, darkness was no obstacle. Once within this place, once through the secret entrance from the Amaranth Club, a skilfully devised system of taking so many paces, of ascending or descending so many stairs, led to one of those private gambling dens of which there are more in the West End of London than even the most astute police have so far dreamed

of. That Mr. Barthelemy dwelt in a quiet-looking residence next door to the club of which he was proprietor and manager many people were aware, but that he conducted a concealed gambling saloon within that residence, and that access was had to it only through the Amaranth Club, no one knew except a small, select, and carefully-chosen coterie, every member of which was passed into it by Mr. Barthelemy himself and was of the temperament, nature, and disposition which made Hilda Tressingham and Otto von Roon birds of a feather, which is another way of saying that all Mr. Barthelemy's clients were born gamblers who had money to gamble with.

There was no lack of light in the rooms in which these two soon found themselves. Mr. Barthelemy's establishment was small but eminently luxurious. To those who knew the way into it—and certainly nobody else could possibly have got into it, in their own and in Mr. Barthelemy's opinion, at any rate—there were no absurd hindrances and restrictions such as are heard of in connection with the gambling-hells of newspaper notoriety. There was no furtive knocking at a mysterious door in which was a wicket that, on your summons, was opened by a hard-faced Janus who cocked a stern eye at you, and after mentally summing you up demanded your credentials—there were no hall-porters inside who, in spite of smart uniform or quiet evening-dress, were obviously roughs and bullies of the hardest sort, brought there to chuck out or silence anybody whom it was necessary to treat in such a fashion.

Mr. Barthelemy knew better than that. Once you were within his snug little casino you felt that you

were really at home. The people that you met there wouldn't mind what you did; every mother's son of them was as bad as yourself and every mother's daughter that chanced to be in evidence was—usually—a good deal worse. So far as personal freedom went, it was Liberty Hall—all you had to do was to have your little flutter, your moderate flutter, your big flutter, in a nice, refined, gentlemanly or ladylike way. Everything was admirably designed for your comfort. There were two excellent reception-rooms—one for the men, another for the women. There was the most adorable, if small, refreshment-room where you could get the choicest wines, the soundest spirits, and little delicacies which you could take between the fingers of one hand while you held your necessary glass in the fingers of the other. You could smoke all over the place—and everybody who went there, of course, smoked the very best cigars and the rarest cigarettes. And to come to the really important features of the place, there were two exquisitely-furnished, perfectly lighted rooms in which play was carried on. There was *trente-et-quarante* in one; *roulette* and *baccarat banque* in the separate halves of another. And occasionally some gambler, thirsting for a new form of excitement, would persuade some of the company, and sometimes all of the company, to join him in trying some extraordinary game which, had its origin been fairly traced out, probably saw the light in some devil's cavern of far-off China.

If Mr. Barthelémy had been a show-man, pointing a country cousin to the human sights of his little *salon de jeu*, he might have made his visitor's mouth

open to such a width as was never known to human lips. Here were folk whom unimaginative innocents would never have expected to see in such quarters. Here was a distinguished legal luminary whose face was grave almost to funereal solemnity under its wig, but vastly different beneath the rose-tinted lamps. Here were politicians; diplomatists; an officer of the Guards; a famous seaman; an actor or two; men about town; a sporting peer; an eminent traveller. And mingling with these men were women—and of these Mr. Barthelemy could have assured you, and with truth—that whatever else they might be, they were all of the best social standing.

“Remember my precepts,” murmured Von Roon as he and his companion crossed the threshold. “They are wise ones, my friend.”

Hilda Tressingham made no answer. She was already quivering with the gambler’s desire.

CHAPTER XI

AVORY THE INQUISITIVE

At two o'clock that morning Richard Avory made one of a few men and women, the latest stayers, who turned out of the Amaranth Club and went flitting away into the night. Some hailed neighbouring taxi-cabs; some stepped into private motor-cars which waited discreetly close by; Avory himself, having lingered in the street under pretence of lighting a cigar until he actually saw the club door closed, walked slowly away. He went up one street and round a corner, crossed another street and found himself in St. James's Square. And there he paced about a while, his head bent, his eyes fixed on the ground, meditatively smoking. At last, he looked up and swung his light walking cane and stared at the stars as if to find information.

"It's queer," he muttered. "It's queer beyond words. It's devilish queer! And I can't understand it."

Finding no information in the faces of the heavens, Avory presently turned and made his way into Jermyn Street, where he occupied a set of old-fashioned but eminently convenient chambers in close proximity to the rear of St. James's Church. He went slowly up to his own door, and was about to

let himself in when he heard the sound of a flute, which was being softly and slowly played in the rooms opposite his own. And at the sound he started and tossed his head, as if a happy inspiration had come to him with the murmur of this midnight music.

"That's old Banister King still up!" he said. "I'll take counsel with him."

Crossing the landing, Ivory rang the electric bell of the opposite door. The flute became silent; presently he heard steps; the door opened; the doorway framed a figure.

To anybody unacquainted with it, the first sight of this figure must needs have caused wonderment and speculation. It was that of a tall young man whose hair stood out from his head on crown and at sides at strange and uncontrolled angles, whose face was long and meagre and lighted by a pair of large and unusually lustrous eyes, and who at this moment was habited in a curious cassock-like gown of black velvet, on which was painted grotesque figures and ornamentations in vivid flame colour. In his left hand this young man carried a handsome silver-mounted flute; with the other he beckoned to his visitor pretty much as a wizard might beckon an enquirer to step within his cell.

"Come in, Ivory," he said in an unconcerned fashion. "I'm thinking, really, of leaving my outer door open so that people can walk in without disturbing me."

"And a nice fright strangers would get, to walk in here and see you togged up like that in the middle of the night, tootling on that whistle!" said Ivory, as he stepped in and closed the door behind him.

"I wonder if anywhere else in London one could find a man playing a flute at nearly three o'clock in the morning?"

"Don't know and don't care," answered the other indifferently. "Come in and help yourself to a drink, which is no doubt your immediate need."

"Not particularly; besides, I could have treated myself to a score of drinks in my own hole," responded Avory. "No, I wanted to talk. However, since you are so hospitable——"

King led the way into a lighted room and threw himself into a chair, waving his hand at the same time towards a small sideboard, to which Avory turned with familiarity. He mixed himself a drink, and glass in hand looked round at his host and the room.

"Gad, King!" he exclaimed. "What a queer chap you are, and what a queer den this is!"

Ninety-nine people out of every hundred would have agreed with Mr. Richard Avory in his assertion. The room in which he stood was certainly as queer as its occupant. The furniture was queer; the pictures were queer, the books were queer, the ornaments, the odds and ends, were queer. It was very easy to see that there was not a thing in the room that was not costly, from the Japanese prints on the walls to the beautifully vellum-bound books that were thrown here and there, from the priceless rugs to the old china. But the atmosphere was odd, bizarre, eccentric—and oddest of all was the sight in the centre of the room. For there, perched on a round table, was the diabolically-ugly figure of some Eastern deity—a twisted and contorted thing of

green jade, in the furrowed face of which were set a pair of staring yellow eyes, baleful, cruel. Before it, incense, sickly and heavy, was slowly curling up from a strangely-fashioned censer; on one side stood a flask of wine, the flask, old and beautiful, the wine purple-red; on the other, a Turkish pipe, the stem of which curled over the table like a serpent. At all these things Banister King cocked a whimsical eye.

"I was just offering to his highness a little incense and a little music," he observed. "He is apt to need soothing at times. The wine I am drinking myself. He doesn't drink."

Avory made a face at the figure on the table.

"It wouldn't surprise me to know that you practise devil-worship," he said, as he dropped into a chair. "But you always were a queer chap. And yet, despite all your eccentricities, I always credit you with having more cute, quick, common sense than any man of my acquaintance, which is just why I dropped in to-night—or, rather, this morning. I want to tell you something."

Banister King stretched out a long, thin hand, picked up a square of rich silk, curiously wrought with strange devices, and dropped it over the image. He looked at his visitor.

"Tell it," he said.

"Well," continued Avory, who had watched this operation with a puzzled expression. "Well, you know about my joining the Amaranth Club?"

"Yes."

"You know why I joined—that I was born with a desire to see as many sides of life as possible, and

that my natural taste in that direction has led me into some queer places?"

"Proceed."

Avory reached out for a cigarette and lighted it before he obeyed his friend's admonition.

"Well," he said at last. "I think the Amaranth Club is one of the queerest—perhaps the queerest—places I've ever struck."

"In what way?" asked King.

"I'll tell you. That's what I came in for. Now, first, to be explicit, you know of the Amaranth Club, although you steadily refuse to join it. Also you know that Barthelemy is its proprietor. Now, Barthelemy knows me as Mr. Richard Avory, a barrister who only very occasionally gets a brief, but who has certain means of his own, who is to a certain extent a man about town, who loves a little society of the sort one finds at the Amaranth, and he also knows—for the gentleman knows a devil of a lot—that I am in the running for a rich wife. He also knows who the lady is. So Barthelemy regards me as an eligible for the Amaranth."

"Evidently, or you'd never have been elected," said King.

"Quite so. But Barthelemy does not know of my ineradicable curiosity," continued Avory. "He does not know that I always, from sheer force of habit, peep, peer, pry into everything that I come across—I'm so naturally inquisitive, King, that if I see or hear anything which excites my curiosity I can't refrain from following it up. And now I'm come to the end of the preamble and I'll get to the present pertinent facts. I have already made you

aware that the lady whom I design to marry is Miss Marcia Ellington, the only daughter of old Stephen Ellington, the millionaire manufacturer of Ashminster?"

"I drink to your speedy union with the lady—and her money-bags," said King.

"Kind of you. Well, the other day I was down there, and I went with Miss Ellington (who has a sneaking liking for me) to lunch at her brother's, the present M.P. for their town. There we encounter Mrs. Tressingham, sister of Lord Hartsdale, married to Colonel Tressingham, at present in India, a pretty, dashing woman, with, I should say, a spice—considerable spice—of the original amount of evil in her. She was helping in George Ellington's election—why, nobody could make out, as, though her brother's place is close by, none of their family has ever taken part in politics before. However, that's nothing. What is something is that I met Mrs. Tressingham to-night at the Amaranth."

"Ah! She is a member!"

"And evidently a well-accustomed one. One of the original foundation, I should think, from what I saw. I am not sure whether she saw me at the time I saw her or whether she didn't. However, the point was that I saw her. I also saw her in what appeared to be very secret conversation with another member, a man named Otto von Roon, who is, I understand, a German living permanently in London and mixed up with financial matters."

"Son of Shylock von Roon?" suggested King, drily.

"No. I think he's something bigger than that.

Well, now we're going to come to the whole point of my story. I'm inquisitive about this Mrs. Tressingham—I want to know what her game is. Because I'm dead certain she's playing a game, and that her sudden interest in that Ashminster election has something to do with it. So, having seen her and Von Roon in deep consultation or conversation, I determined to keep my eye on her, or on her or him. Now, you must bear in mind that it is a strict rule of the Amaranth, and Barthelemy is an absolute Dracon in insisting on the observance of his rules, that everybody must leave at two o'clock. Get that in mind, King."

"I have it firmly fixed. Go on."

"Well, now, there is, just within the entrance hall of this Amaranth, a small lounge, seated in which one can observe whoever enters and whoever leaves. It is impossible for anybody to come or go without escaping the observation of anyone posted in that lounge who really means to watch. Now, immediately after seeing my fellow-members, Mrs. Tressingham and Mr. von Roon, in an upstairs room, I took up my post in that lounge, resolved to see them leave. Eh?"

"Well?"

Avory laughed and threw away his cigarette.

"Well, they never did leave!" he said. "I saw every Jack and Jill off the premises at two o'clock—I saw the doors close for the night. But no Mrs. Tressingham left, and no Von Roon left. They never left, King, from the time I saw them."

"Pooh! Some other entrance. That's all."

"No!" said Avory. "There is no other entrance."

And now I'll tell you something else. This fact—plain, undoubted fact—made me begin to think pretty hard. And then I remembered that I had seen several people, whom I know well as habitués of the club, in there about midnight, and I began to ask myself if I had seen them leave. Now, I've a good memory, and I can trust it, and I'm dead certain of this—in addition to Von Roon and Mrs. Tressingham, there were several people in the Amaranth who hadn't left it at two o'clock. I'd take my dying oath, as the vulgar are so fond of saying, in at any rate three cases—Jack Hazeldene, the actor, hadn't left; Captain Dilkes—you know him—he hadn't left; and there was Lydia Linkinshaw, you know, of the *Hilarious*, and it would indeed have been a miracle if she could have left without my seeing her! So, where are those people? What are they doing there? The rules are strict. Besides, there's another thing. If the police saw anybody leaving that club after its proper hours, there'd be enquiries made. Now, what do you think of it, King?"

Avory's host had lighted his Turkish pipe and sat dreamily smoking it.

He shook his head.

"Don't know. It seems queer. That is, if it's as you say. But I cling to my first opinion—there's another entrance."

"Then I assure you there is no other entrance," asserted Avory.

"Servants'? Tradesmen's?"

"The entrance for both is in the area."

"These people might have left by the area, then, before two."

Avory got up.

"Rot, King! Is that likely?"

"No, it isn't likely. But—well, what next?"

"Well, I'm going to find out more. I'm going to be still more inquisitive. In the meantime, as you're such a chap for using your brains, try to consider this problem, and see if you can suggest anything. Of course, I've got a theory."

King looked an interrogative as Avory made for the door. And Avory laughed.

"Yes," he said. "And my theory is that the Amaranth is a cloak that covers—what?"

CHAPTER XII

BANISTER KING TAKES A HAND

Leaving his question unanswered, Ivory threw his friend a careless nod and went away, and Banister King presently heard the door across the landing loudly closed. He himself sat for some time devoting his energies to his Turkish pipe, staring meanwhile at the fantastic covering which he had thrown over the green jade image. But at last he laid the pipe aside, rose to his feet, and glanced at the dial of an old French clock which stood on his mantelpiece.

"A quarter past three," he murmured; "a quarter past three in the morning. Wherefore, as this is the last week in June, the sun is due to rise over the microcosm called London in just about half an hour. We will go out and catch her first rays."

Thereupon Banister King, having drawn his curtains and admitted a flood of light, turned out his lamps and looked about him. The incense of the censer was emitting a last faint curl of smoke; he lifted the arabesque lid and crushed out the smouldering grains with the tip of a finger; that done, he removed the censer to a cabinet crowded with such curiosities, and lifted the image, divested of its covering, to a pedestal which stood in the corner of

the room. He stood for a minute regarding it cynically.

"You are ugly enough at all times, my friend," he observed; "but you are never quite so abominably ugly as in the light of day. That is why you stand in the corner. And the more I look at you, the more I wonder what was in the mind of the man whose art fashioned you!"

With a laugh, King turned away into a room which led out of his sitting-room; a room as plain and unremarkable as the other was bizarre and to be wondered at. There was a narrow camp bed in one corner; there was a dressing-table furnished with a very full supply of toilet articles; there was one occasional-table and one chair, and there was a massive wardrobe, lavishly supplied with drawers and cupboards. It was, in short, a room in which a man might take great pains about dressing, and in which he could sleep in spartan fashion.

King took off his extraordinary gown, and revealed himself in a suit of silk underwear. He took from his wardrobe a plain suit of grey tweed, and in a few minutes had arranged himself in it, and in such irreproachable linen as went fittingly with it. That done, having considered himself in the great mirror which made a central panel to the wardrobe, he selected from a row of hats which hung on pegs a soft slouch which effectually concealed his unmanageable hair. And picking up a pair of gloves and a light walking cane, he let himself out of his rooms, and throwing a whimsical glance at Ivory's door, walked gently down the stairs and out into Jermyn Street.

Though the sun had not yet risen over the roofs, the streets were already as light as at mid-day. At that hour they were deserted; there was not even a street-scavenger to be seen. He turned slowly down by the very route which Avory had traversed earlier in the morning, and lounging along as if he had been lazily promenading Piccadilly at mid-day with nothing to do but to kill time, he came to the street in which stood the Amaranth Club. It was a small street, a short street, leading to nowhere in particular, being, in fact, an abbreviated bar in a gridiron of streets, and there was not a sign of life in it save a solitary cat which sat on the step of the house from which it had been, presumably, shut out, and glared at King with baleful eyes. And King, traversing this bit of street, walked more slowly, observing the Amaranth Club from the side opposite to it, and noting the house next to the club, which he knew to be that of Mr. Barthelemy. There was nothing in the exterior of either to show that they had anything remarkable about them, and King, from his knowledge of the locality, which was deep and extensive, knew that Avory was right in saying that the entrances to the club were as he had described. But King was just then more interested in Mr. Barthelemy's house than in the club. It was a high, narrow house, whereas the club was a fairly wide one, and had windows on each side of its front door. Next door to Mr. Barthelemy's house was another house which was just as narrow—a house sacred to the users of medicated baths, which fact was announced on a modest brass plate on the right-hand of the entrance. That, at this particular moment, was all

there was to see. But King found much food for reflection in seeing it.

"If Ivory is right," he mused, as he lounged along, swinging his stick and sniffing the morning air, "if Ivory is right, and some people remain behind in the Amaranth, there's one thing that's dead certain, and that is, they don't stop in the Amaranth. How do they get out again?"—he emphasized his question with slashes of his walking-cane—"without attracting undue attention in a quiet street like this? Barthelemy is not such a fool as to pass 'em out through the club at any hour of the morning. Barthelemy is not so idiotic as to think that people would believe he gave supper parties at his private residence four or five nights a week. The police would begin to notice *that*—and as to the club, it's impossible. The club is in enjoyment of a sober and righteous reputation. Therefore—— But, talking of the police, behold, a constable!"

A policeman, walking in lordly leisure, hove round the corner and advanced, his boots beating rhythmic measure, towards the stroller in the grey tweed suit. He sized him up as he came, and at first his eyes were inscrutable; then he suddenly remembered that he had seen this gentleman before, and he lifted a gloved finger. King swung up his stick in answer to the salute, and drew to a halt.

"This," he said gravely, "is quite providential, officer. I have a mind to smoke a cigar—this cigar—and I find that I have not a match upon me. Now, if I met a man who gave me a match, I might be considerably inclined to give him rather more than its weight in silver for it, eh?"

The constable grinned. This, he thought, was a merry gentleman, with a nice sense of humour. He hastened to produce a box of matches from some hidden recess of his uniform.

"There y'are, sir," he said readily. "Quite welcome, sir. Nice morning, sir."

"Charming! charming!" responded King. He slowly lighted his cigar, and when it was safely burning, restored the box. "A delightful morning—and a peaceful neighbourhood in which to enjoy it."

And with a delicate manipulation of fingers and wrist he contrived in unobtrusive fashion to accompany the return of the matches with a couple of half-crowns.

"Thank you, sir—much obliged, sir," said the constable. "Er—fond of an early morning walk, sir? I think I've seen you before, sir!"

King nodded gravely.

"Ah, I daresay, officer," he answered. "A good many officers have seen me early in the morning, clothed, and in my right mind, you know."

The officer grinned. Any little pleasantry deserves a grin from a gentleman who accompanies it with five shillings.

"The fact is," continued King, "the fact is, officer, I suffer from a very remarkable form of insomnia—sleeplessness, you know. Do what I will, I cannot sleep before six o'clock in the morning. I have tried many doctors, and all the remedies. I have made trial of, I suppose, pretty nearly every remedy under the sun. That is to say, with the exception of drugs, which I abhor. I have drunk tumblers of hot water; I have sipped stout out of a teaspoon; I have even

abased myself by eating a mess of boiled onions. All no good—until six o'clock in the morning comes, I cannot sleep."

The constable, who had listened to this with an expression of great interest and commiseration, nodded.

"Just so, sir," he said sympathetically. "The thing is, sir, can you sleep then?"

"Excellently!" replied King. "I fall asleep at once, and I sleep soundly for seven hours."

"Capital thing that, sir," said the constable. "I had a mate once that got into your way, sir, all through family trouble, you know, sir, and a terrible time he had, and a nice time they had as had to do with him. Couldn't get his sleep, nohow! Good thing you can, sir—whatever time it is. Same time, to be awake all night must be very trying, sir. You find walking about do you good, sir?"

"I find it a very good thing," answered King. "I pass the first part of the night reading and amusing myself. About this time I come out for a walk. I have walked over a great deal of the West End. At half-past five I return to my rooms in Jermyn Street, eat some light food, and go leisurely to bed and to sleep. Oh, yes, I have indeed much to be thankful for. At the same time, I should rejoice to be restored to normal conditions. Now, there is one remedy I have not tried—that is a course of medicated baths. And oddly enough, as I strolled along here jut now, I see there is an establishment of that nature at the end of the street there. Queer! I never noticed it before!"

The constable nodded his head in the direction of

the house which stood next to Mr. Barthelemy's.

"Just so, sir—there is," he remarked. "But for your complaint, sir, what time would you want those baths?"

"Oh, I believe—I'm not sure, not having gone into the matter fully as yet—but I believe last thing at night," replied King.

The constable looked sorry.

"Ah!" he said. "Then that establishment wouldn't suit you, sir. I know that place—I'm sometimes on day duty round here. It's an early morning place, that, sir. You'll see a brass plate on the wall by the door—hours, seven to ten in the morning, and three to six in the afternoon. No other, sir."

"You interest me!" said King. "Seven to ten in the morning! Those are very early hours indeed!"

"Get a good many customers, though, sir," answered the constable. "I've seen a fair number in the morning when I've gone on duty at eight o'clock. I couldn't say what they do about afternoon. But there's no night hours there. Still, I should say you'd have no difficulty about finding an establishment of that nature where there is."

"Oh, I should think not," remarked King. "No—one can find almost anything one wants in London. Well, I shall pursue my usual walk. You, I suppose, go off your beat soon, now?"

"Off at six-thirty, sir," answered the constable.

"I wish you a good appetite for your breakfast," said King.

He nodded affably to the constable's salutation, and moved leisurely away, making for St. James's Street,

as if he meant to turn down and go into the Park. But when he had noticed by careful observation that the constable went off in a way which would leave his own coast clear, King doubled round a corner, and regained Jermyn Street and his own rooms, and he laughed a little as he passed Ivory's door. Once within his sitting-room, he made himself a cup of coffee on a patent and elaborately fitted stove, and he sipped it slowly, sitting on the edge of his table and staring at the green jade figure.

"Perhaps you gave me the idea, you ugly devil!" he said. "But, anyway, I think I've got at something. And what is the something? Well, I think that the Amaranth Club, and Mr. Barthelemy's private house, and the medicated bath establishment, which is open so very, very early, fit nicely one into the other, and I promise myself some fun out of them that may be—serious!"

CHAPTER XIII

PROGRESS

Having once made her compact with Von Roon and Mr. Barthelemy, Hilda Tressingham went her own way in the matter of carrying out her share of it. For the next few weeks she was so busily engaged that she had little time to think of anything but the most pressing things, and she gave scant attention to any matters connected with the far-away Colonel in India, forgetting him, indeed, so much as to lay aside one letter of his unread for the moment, and then committing the serious mistake of becoming oblivious of the fact that it lay unopened in a drawer of her secretaire. She had carefully read the cablegram which he had sent her in reply to her letter from Hartsdale Park. In that he had briefly notified her that he would take her advice and hang on, and she had written him a warm epistle of commendation for following her counsel. Secure in her belief that he would remain where he was, she had put him out of her mind. He was not on the spot; he was not a matter of the present moment; it would do if he were attended to, in some fashion or another, that day twelve months. It was the prime article of her creed, as it is that of all men and women like her, that self and the present second are the chief things to be considered if one would look after one's self.

And there were many things to be done, and in addition to doing these things—all of them, if the truth be told, for her own benefit—she wanted to do a little for her brother, being firmly of opinion that blood is thicker than water, and that charity begins at home. So she carefully conducted and carried out the negotiations about the letting of the family house in Curzon Street to young Mr. and Mrs. Ellington, and in due course had the proud satisfaction of knowing that the transaction was complete. She worked like a slave in getting the house in order; the tradesmen whom she employed declared that she gave them no mercy, and was for ever hurrying them forward. Upholsterers and decorators had to work double tides to keep pace with her demands; she was never off the premises; her watchful eye was ever on them. But she knew what she was doing, and in little more than a month after the Ashminster election Mr. and Mrs. George Ellington were duly installed in their town house. And that done, Hilda told her brother that she had finished her small effort on his behalf and now had no more to do with it.

“You ought to consider me a trump, Hartsdale,” she said, talking to him in her Down Street flat, where he was staying for a day or two before setting out on a fishing expedition to Norway. “I don’t think many sisters would take the trouble for a lazy brother that I’ve taken for you. I’ve found you a rattling good tenant: your house is let for three years; the probability is they’ll renew the lease; you rake in two thousand a year from it; I’ve superintended all the decorating and the upholstering and the renovating, and, to crown all, I’ve so arranged

matters that the expense which those matters have necessitated will fall very lightly upon you. And I hope you're properly grateful."

"Quite," answered Lord Hartsdale, passing his cup for more coffee. "I think you've managed excellently. I think you ought to have been a business woman. I'll write you a testimonial, if you like. And now that my little job's finished, I suppose you'll go on with your own? Good luck!"

Hilda's own job, thus airily referred to, had already begun. She had had George Ellington to dinner at the Down Street flat two or three times while the town house was being made ready, and before his wife had come to town. The dinners had been *tête-à-tête*, and she had taken the greatest pains about the cooking, and the service, and the wines, and had laid herself out to please and flatter and make up to her guest. But she was not certain in her own mind if George Ellington was quite such an easy fish to land as she had at first thought him to be. She had been quick to observe a sudden flash of surprise, a sudden arising of constraint in him, when, on his first visit to Down Street, he had found that it was to dine with her alone, and though she was very well aware that she exercised a fascination over him for which he himself would have found it hard to account, she recognized that there was something in him which would take a good deal of beating down and pushing aside before he would yield to it. She saw that, quite unknown to himself, his manner became at times reserved and guarded; it was as if, through no volition of his own, his mental forces armed themselves to repel an attack which lay

ambushed in darkness. And she began to see that if she wanted to get into George Ellington's confidence, it would require more diplomacy, and more scheming, and more subtlety of attack, than could be developed in a short time.

The truth was that so far as Hilda Tressingham's plans were concerned, George Ellington was, to a certain degree, made proof against them by heredity. He came of a family in which strong-headed Radicalism and Puritanism had developed for generations, and though he himself would have stoutly denied it, what is called the Nonconformist conscience was strongly implanted in him. He believed that the prim and proper pragmatism of his father was not in himself, but no man can ever wholly escape from the early influences, environment, and atmosphere of his life, and George Ellington was his father's son. He admired Mrs. Tressingham; he thought her a very clever and smart woman; it was pleasing to him to talk to her, to hear her talk, to dine with her in her luxurious, flower-scented rooms, to be alone with her, to touch her hand, to feel the feminine suggestion of her presence. But—and the but was an important one—he was always conscious that she was not of his world, not of his sort, and that in her and in her atmosphere there was danger—a danger of something which it would have taken a much cleverer man than himself either to define or understand. He was not clever, save in a business and official sense; he had never in his life tried to analyse character or look into psychological motives and impulses, but in this, as in many other matters, he had a natural instinct which was worth a good deal. And

though, like many another grown-up child, he liked the sensation of getting as near the fire as he could, he had no intention of putting even the tip of his finger into it.

George Ellington said nothing of all these matters to his wife, nor to his family; but Letty, being simple, talked freely of Mrs. Tressingham to old Stephen and to Marcia, and the elder man took occasion to speak to the younger. Over his son's private affairs he had no control; George was a fully accredited partner in the great Ellington business, and a very rich man, and Stephen Ellington was not the sort of man to tell a grown-up son who had already made a figure in the world how to manage his own affairs or spend his money. But being in town one night, and with George, at the old flat in Queen Anne's Mansions, he was minded to speak, and he spoke plainly.

"I don't know whether you're quite wise, George, in cultivating the friendship of the Hartsdale family," he said. "Don't think me interfering; but, of course, we hear what Letty says."

"And what does Letty say?" asked George, half surlily.

"Oh, little nothings! But—this Mrs. Tressingham, now? You've seen a good deal of her lately."

"Naturally, since she's been kind enough to look after the house in Curzon Street," answered George. "She's taken a tremendous lot off our shoulders."

Old Ellington glanced at his son with a quizzical expression. But George was selecting a cigar from a cabinet which stood on the mantelpiece, and was too busy too look at his father.

"Just so," said Stephen, with a dry cough. "But, in these days, it is rare to hear of so much philanthropy on such short notice and such sudden acquaintance."

George looked round, and stared in genuine amazement at his father.

"I—don't understand," he remarked.

"Don't you, my boy? Well, I mean that nowadays, when one hears of peers touting for wine merchants, and peeresses starting bonnet-shops, one naturally supposes that even Mrs. Tressingham doesn't do something for nothing."

"You mean——" began George, and then stopped. "What do you mean?" he added, lighting his cigar. "You're a bit cryptic."

"I mean that I don't suppose Mrs. Tressingham took the trouble to see after doing up her brother's house in Curzon Street for you, spending a lot of time over it, as she seems, from Letty's account, to have done, all for nothing. She may incline to playing the part of house agent, but if she does, I suppose she wants the usual agent's fees?"

"She got nothing from me, anyway," answered George, dropping into his easy-chair with a show of unconcern. "Not a penny!"

"Then we'll suppose her brother's made it up to her," said Stephen. "Though, from what I've heard and known of him, he's not likely to part with anything that he once handles. They're a queer lot, that, George!"

"So you and Marcia seem to think," said George. "But so far as I'm concerned, the matter's very plain and ordinary. I've taken a house from Lord Harts-

dale as I might have taken one from anybody else. his sister's been kind enough to interest herself in the deal—and that's all there is in it. She's been—friendly."

"But why?" asked George's father. "Why this sudden interest in—us? We've been there at Ashminster, and they've been there at Hartsdale, for a good many years—always, of course—and they've never shown any interest before. Why now?"

George picked up an evening newspaper in a fashion which showed that the conversation was not quite to his liking. Secretly he believed that Mrs. Tressingham was impressed by the promise of his own political future and desired to share in some sort in the glory that was coming to him, but he was not going to say so to his father. Moreover, much as he admired his father as a business man, he considered him hopelessly out-of-date in social and political matters; further, he was one of those cocksure young men who believe themselves fully capable of looking after their own affairs.

"Oh, I don't know," he said carelessly. "One never knows why anybody does anything, does one?"

"Well, I suppose you know; but," said the senior, "but have a care, my lad. I've known more than one promising political reputation seriously affected, if not absolutely ruined, by a pretty woman before to-day."

George made no answer to that, though he was irritated by it. He was always irritated when his father and his sister talked in that fashion; he wished they would leave him alone—it was only their old-fashioned, narrow notions, he argued, that made them

object to his friendship with Hilda Tressingham. And he was all the more irritated because he himself was a little uneasy, a little doubtful.

His peace of mind on this point was not improved by a few pithy remarks made to him by a fellow-member, in a corner of the smoking-room a few days later. The fellow-member was older than George, and was well known as a man about town who knew everybody, and exercised a caustic wit upon his fellow-creatures.

"So you've formed the acquaintance of Mrs. Tressingham?" observed this man with sudden frankness, giving George a keen glance over his shoulder as they sat side by side in two easy-chairs.

"Eh?" exclaimed George, taken unawares.

"Saw you in the Park with her the other day," said the other.

"We're neighbours at Ashminster," replied George. "Their place and ours are close together. And I've taken her brother's town-house."

"Just so," observed the fellow-member drily. "Still, I think you haven't known her long. That's why I said you've formed her acquaintance."

"Well, why shouldn't I form her acquaintance?" asked George defiantly.

"Why? Oh, that's for you! Still, you're a member of the Government. And members of the Government should be careful," responded George's friend.

"I don't know what you're talking about," growled George. "What's the matter about Mrs. Tressingham?"

"Did I say anything was the matter? No. I made a simple remark. And yet," he drawled care-

lessly, as he rose, "if I might give a word of advice, I would say—don't talk politics with that lady."

And he walked unconcernedly away, leaving George angrier than he had been with his father. He grew more uneasy, and more doubtful, and Hilda Tressingham was quick to see it, and she began to consider the possibilities of Letty rather than of George.

CHAPTER XIV

CONSPIRACY

There are in Shaftesbury Avenue—the more pretentious part of it—many well-arranged and cosy flats, in any one of which the man who loves to live in London *en garçon* may accommodate himself very well. It would indeed be difficult to find a corner of the town which is, in all senses of the word, more convenient for the person of leisure and pleasure. Here one is in close proximity to the principal theatres; all the best clubs are within a short drive or an easy stroll; such shops and emporiums as men are likely to frequent are close at hand; all around lies a choice of restaurants, grill-rooms, supper-rooms, from the small fry of Soho to the large concerns of Piccadilly, such as Lucullus himself never dreamt of. A man who is fond of observing human nature may spend a whole day in the adjacent streets and see something new every minute; if he desires the other sort of nature he can drop into the parks and look at the ducks or trifle a while with the flower-girls of Piccadilly Circus. To the man who loves Life, and cannot abide to be out of its fierce throb and pulsation, a first-class flat in the better portion of Shaftesbury Avenue is an eminently desirable residence.

Otto von Roon loved Life greatly, and though he had it in him to admire a fine sunset amongst the

mountains, and even a retiring daisy by the wayside, he was never entirely content unless he had the pavements of cities beneath his boots and the smell of the town in his nostrils. He had known more cities than one in his time, but London had been his city for some years, and he had made a nest for himself, in a quiet house of chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue, of which he was as proud as he was fond. Being, like a good many well-conditioned and sleek men, unable to live without luxury, he had surrounded himself with all the comforts that he desired. He had a beautiful sitting-room in which he kept his pictures, his choicely-bound books, and his grand piano. The pictures were all of the best; the books were classics; on the grand piano he discoursed music with the taste and skill of a virtuoso: the friends who visited him were always charmed with this room, and recognized in Otto a man of irreproachable taste. He had another room into which only the most intimate of his friends ever penetrated; this was a sort of study and library in which he could read and write. He had a wonderful set of reference books there, dealing with the affairs of almost every country under the sun, and an equally wonderful collection of maps, and with these books and maps he spent a great deal of his day. And besides these apartments and these things he had a luxurious sleeping chamber and an elegantly appointed bathroom, and, in order to look after them and him, the most trusted and confidential of body-servants, a reserved, hard-featured, inscrutable-eyed man whose name was Metz.

This man, opening the outer door of his master's chambers one morning in response to a knock and

ring, found himself confronted by Mrs. Tressingham, at sight of whom he immediately stepped back in a fashion that suggested a bygone military training. It was no easy thing for any visitors to see Von Roon of a morning, but Metz knew that the lady before him had the *entrée* to his master at any time. And Hilda swept in as if the place were her own.

"Mr. von Roon up yet, Metz?" she enquired carelessly.

"My master will be out of his dressing-room in a few minutes, madame," answered the man with measured accents. "I shall tell him you are here."

He opened the door of the sitting-room and bowed her within; a moment later she heard Von Roon's voice from beyond some other door. Ere she had time to select a chair, he opened the door of his study and stood smiling at her—a big, pink man of glowing health, oiled and groomed, and looking as if he had not a care or a thought in the world beyond his own pleasures.

"Come in here," he said. "I am just going to have my coffee. You will, perhaps, have some also?"

Hilda crossed into the inner room, and threw herself into one of the two deep, leather-covered chairs which it contained.

"No," she answered. "But you can tell Metz to give me a glass of champagne."

Von Roon looked at her. She returned his look with a steady glance, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Eh, well, then," he said. "It is, at any rate, better than brandy-and-soda. Your nerves, eh?"

"My nerves are all right," she answered, "and

I ate my breakfast at nine o'clock, and it's now twelve. Tell him to give me a biscuit—and then to clear out. I want to talk."

Von Roon watched her in silence as he sipped his coffee and ate a roll. She drank a glass of champagne from the bottle which Metz had opened for her, and poured herself out another.

"I'm not giving way to drink, Otto," she said, looking at him, "and, as you know, I don't drink between meals. But I've been doing a lot of thinking this morning, and I wanted something. That's it—that stuff. Now we'll talk."

"Yes," he said. "Talk. The subject?"

"That's evident," she answered. "This affair with——" she paused and glanced at the door.

"I've told you a thousand times," said Von Roon calmly, "that this room is sound-proof. And if it were not—though it is—and Metz were eavesdropping at the door, Metz is—Metz."

"It's habit," she said. "Well, this affair with Ellington, then. Otto, I don't think I can do anything with him."

Von Roon, who had just struck a match in order to light a cigarette, dropped it with a sharp exclamation.

"What! You?" he said. "You?"

She looked back at him, as if she were trying to gauge his knowledge of her.

"It's just because I am I," she answered; "just because I know my own powers, know what I can do, that I say I don't think I can do anything with this man. He's—he's not quite what I expected—not quite what I thought he would turn out to be."

Von Roon made no immediate answer. He sat, blowing away little rings and spirals of smoke, and watched her. And presently, seeing that he showed no signs of speaking, Hilda went on.

"The fact is, Otto, I never met quite that type of man before," she said. "I think I know just what he feels. He's in a certain way fascinated. He likes to be with me; he likes to hear me talk; he's flattered, in a way, to have the pleasure of my society. Remember that these people are essentially bourgeois, and that being so, there's a distinct taste in them for the company of the aristocracy. It's flattering to the pride of the Ellingtons—the younger ones, anyway—that Lord Hartsdale's sister should have taken them up. George Ellington's pride goes up several inches if he's seen in the Park with the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham. But——"

She paused and laughed a little, and Von Roon noticed the curl of her lip as the laughter ceased.

"Ah, yes!" he murmured. "The but, eh? But—what?"

"But he's afraid of me," she said. "And in addition to being afraid, he's suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

"Ah, perhaps not the sort of suspicion that you mean, Otto! It's a suspicion that you wouldn't understand—that I could scarcely explain to you. But it's there. He doesn't suspect me of any design on him; he doesn't think I want to rob him of anything; but the suspicion, I tell you, is there. I've seen it. And it will always keep him so far off that I shall never be able to draw him any nearer. Although he doesn't know it himself, there's a great

deal of the old puritanical papa in Mr. George Ellington. And in my case it will prove his safeguard."

Von Roon nodded his head several times. He was evidently thinking deeply: turning over in his scheming mind all that she put before him. And he rose and began to pace the room, his hands grasping each other behind his back.

"Yes, yes!" he said at last. "I think I see what you mean. You're a very clever woman, Hilda, and I don't believe you're likely to go far wrong in your conclusions. But—our arrangement? It's of the utmost seriousness, utmost importance. We must have or see that document. He'll have it. The easiest way seemed to be to get it out of him—him, you understand. And—through you."

He paused, and looked at her searchingly; but she made no answer, and presently Von Roon went on.

"That money, now—the five thousand," he said. "It can be increased. If that——"

She made an impatient movement with her hand.

"It's not that," she said. "It's simply, Otto, that having weighed everything up, I don't see my way to do it."

Von Roon dropped into his chair and threw away his cigarette.

"It's done, then?" he said.

"No," she answered. "Not done: there's another way."

"Ah! And that?"

Hilda motioned him to push his cigarette-box towards her. She looked at him while her fingers picked up what she wanted. And when she spoke

she leaned forward, and with another unconscious glance towards the door, another lowering of her voice, whispered two words: "The wife."

Von Roon started.

"The wife! His wife?"

"His wife. Of course."

"Ah! You see a chance there?"

"A better chance—a much better chance—a far greater chance."

"Yes, yes! In what way?"

Hilda lighted her cigarette.

"If I could only get her into my power—into my power in such a fashion that she would have to do my bidding—eh?"

"Capital! capital!"

"And then if I could be certain when he is in possession of that particular document?"

"You can be certain of that."

"To a day?"

"To an hour."

"Then, I think it might be an easy thing for me to obtain possession of it, for a while, at any rate."

"Good. It might. But now, tell me, what sort of woman is this wife?"

"An excellent woman for our purpose. She is country-bred, but she has an itching desire to see what she fondly believes to be life," said Hilda with a sneer. "She has been kept in down there at Ashminster, and she wants to make a flight or two. She even desires to go to the length of doing a few daring things—quite innocently, of course."

"Wants to peep through the bars, eh?" laughed Von Roon.

"She wouldn't mind going into the cage if she could escape quite whole," replied Hilda.

"Well, you are the woman to take her inside. But now—how to get a hold on her?"

Hilda considered matters a little.

"The Amaranth," she said.

"Ah!" exclaimed Von Roon. "You want to propose her?"

"Nonsense! But I want to take her there."

"One can't take friends there," he said. "You know the rule."

"Barthelemy made the rules, and he can bend them," she remarked.

"Yes," he said musingly, "yes."

"I don't quite see the way, but it will come, and it will come there," she said. "I mean—through the Amaranth. Otto, three heads are better than two. Suppose you ring up Barthelemy, and arrange to lunch with him?"

Von Roon rose and crossed to his telephone.

CHAPTER XV

THE SPIDER'S SILKEN WEB

According to the late M. de Talleyrand, that astute politician of chequered and infinitely varied career, the only thing necessary to bring about the successful termination of a certain enterprise—to wit, the subjugation of woman—was opportunity, and again opportunity, and yet, once more, opportunity. Nothing else was needed.⁴

Hilda Tressingham saw her moment of opportunity as regards the innocent Letty Ellington when she picked up her *Morning Post* one day towards the end of that session, and saw that George Ellington had departed, on the previous evening, in company with the other notabilities of the Admiralty, for a cruise to some of the Scotch naval bases, on board the Admiralty yacht. He would be away for four or five days; in that time much might—nay, must—be effected. Always prepared for eventualities, Hilda had already made full arrangements for this episode in the campaign: all that was now necessary was to see Letty, and afterwards to send her confederate a message of two short words: "*To-night.*"

Letty, found alone by Hilda in the renovated and highly-decorated house in Curzon Street, was unfeignedly delighted to see her brilliant friend. Life in London had not turned out quite all that she

had expected it to be. She had quickly wearied of the sensation of living in a fine mansion in the heart of Mayfair, and of staring at the ancestral Hartsdale family pictures. She had begun to feel that she and George were lodgers rather than tenants; the new servants whom it had been necessary to engage were a trouble to her because they were strangers. She and George knew few people intimately; if they gave dinners it was to Parliamentary people who, in her opinion, were dull and boring. George had little time to devote to her; it was rarely that he could take her anywhere. She found no pleasure in making one of a lot of women who sat penned up behind the grille in the Ladies' Gallery of the House of Commons, listening as they could to the dull and dreary platitudes talked by their menfolk on the floor below. She had hoped that Mrs. Tressingham would introduce her to something of that shadowy world of which she had dreamed, and in which she fancied Mrs. Tressingham moved; but so far Mrs. Tressingham had done nothing of the sort. True, Letty had been to the Down Street flat on a few occasions, to drink weak tea and crumble biscuits, but she had never met anybody there, and though Hilda had frequently lunched and dined in Curzon Street, she had never asked her to dine with her, either at home or out. And so when Hilda dropped in that morning she found young Mrs. Ellington decidedly dull and mopish, and was secretly rejoiced, knowing that here was the very mood and moment.

"You look as if you were going to a funeral," said Hilda, eyeing her quarry well over.

"I'm not going to anything so exciting," answered Letty. "I'm going to nothing, unless it's to run round the Park two or three times, of which I'm heartily sick."

"Mr. Ellington away?" asked Hilda innocently.

"George is away for four days. He's gone to inspect something or other in Scotland," said Letty.

"And provided no amusement for you in the meantime?"

Letty made a grimace.

"He said something about Marcia. I daresay Marcia may drop in to lunch. If she doesn't, she's sure to look in during the afternoon, just to see that I'm alive, or to preach one of her sermons. Do stop to lunch?"

"Not if Marcia's coming," replied Hilda with brutal candour. "I can't stand your sister-in-law, my dear."

"I've got to," said Letty. "And I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Ellington comes with her."

Hilda made no remark for the moment. She affected to study Letty's countenance, and her own assumed a sympathetic expression.

"I know what you want," she said. "You want stirring up. I'm afraid I've neglected you. But you know, I've so much to do. You see, Letty, I'm always busy with other people's affairs. I've a lot to do for Hartsdale—he's a most unbusinesslike man, and he's got his affairs into an awful mess, and I'm for ever interviewing his lawyers and his agents and all sorts of people for him, and now, of course, he's gone off to Norway for the summer, which is just like him. Then, as Colonel Tressing-

ham is still in India, I've certain affairs of our own to attend to here. I'm sometimes busy all day, and half the night as well. But to-night, now, I've nothing to do. And you?"

"I?" exclaimed Letty. "Nothing. For I certainly won't go down to that wretched Ladies' Gallery again. One might as well go to a mothers' meeting."

"You're sure your father-in-law or your sister-in-law won't be coming here—to-night?" asked Hilda.

"Oh—they? No—I'm sure of that," replied Letty. "Marcia always goes to some settlement or something in the East End when she's in town, and Mr. Ellington spends every evening at the Reform Club."

Hilda showed signs of elation.

"Then we'll have a night off!" she said gaily. "Now listen, my dear. I'll call here for you at half-past six. You're not to dress, mind—you're to wear something quiet and unobtrusive. I'll take you to dine at a certain Bohemian sort of restaurant where the surroundings will amuse and the cooking delight you. Then we'll go to a theatre—I'll decide on which during the day. Or we can go to a music-hall—perhaps you'd like that better. And then, to wind up a glorious evening, I'll take you to my supper club."

Letty's eyes, which had been gradually opening wider and wider as these visions of untrammelled liberty were unfolded before them, now grew very wide indeed. She gasped.

"A—supper club!" she exclaimed. "But—aren't those places awfully—wicked?"

Hilda laughed.

"Don't be a goose!" she said. "Of course they aren't. Mine is most respectable. You'll see some of the smartest people in town there. Of course, it's a little—Bohemian, you know."

Letty hesitated.

"What would George say?" she asked. "You mayn't think it, but George is rather strait-laced."

Again Hilda laughed.

"You're going under my ægis," she said. "If George says anything, I'll say something to George. But, my dear, one's very foolish if one tells one's husband of every little innocent amusement. Our men don't tell us of their small frivols, I can assure you. Now, shall I come at six-thirty?"

Letty found no difficulty in answering that question—the prospect of an evening's gaiety was infinitely preferable to spending the slow hours by herself in that big house. And Hilda went away certain of her first step, and having meditated a little when she got outside, she drove straight to a certain private office of Mr. Barthelemy's, where that gentleman and Otto von Roon were always to be found at the hour of noon. With them she was very precise and direct.

"Now, you both understand," she said. "I've played, and I shall play my part, and you, too, have got to play yours. I shall bring Mrs. Ellington to the club, and the four of us will have supper together, and you'll behave very prettily. You'll see that we have supper in that particular alcove of yours in the supper-room, Mr. Barthelemy, and you'll entertain us in your best way. And after supper, which

mustn't be a moment later than half-past eleven, you'll propose a little amusement in your private room, and you'll show us that new game from Paris, and, of course, we shan't have any great amount of ready money on us, and——”

“And, to be brief, my dear lady,” interrupted Mr. Barthelemy, “what do you particularly want?”

“Mrs. Ellington's signature on a sheet of the club note-paper,” replied Hilda with promptitude. “Let me have that, and I can go ahead in my own way.”

Then she went her way for the time being, and Mr. Barthelemy and Von Roon talked about her when she had gone, and they looked forward to the evening's rencontre with as much curiosity as satisfaction.

“She means to use that signature—in what way?” asked the elder man. “You have some idea—what?”

“Probably to hold over the wife,” replied Von Roon. “I saw in the papers that Ellington is away on official business. I should say that it would not be welcome news to him that his wife was seen at the Amaranth at midnight.”

Mr. Barthelemy elevated his eyebrows.

“Good! She is clever, Mrs. Tressingham. Well, I think we can fix up all she desires. But this young Mrs. Ellington—she is ingénue?”

“Very much so, I should imagine,” answered Von Roon.

“Then I assume my most papa-like manner. And you, dear friend?”

Von Roon shrugged his shoulders.

“Am I not always the nice elder brother?” he

sneered. "Bah! we shall do very well. Till to-night, then."

There were few people in it when Hilda and her charge entered the Amaranth Club that night. But of these few people Richard Avory was one, and Richard Avory, unseen himself, saw Mrs. Tressingham and Mrs. Ellington enter and pass on to the supper-room. There was nothing to surprise him in the elder lady's presence, but at the sight of George Ellington's wife, he felt as if a sudden revelation had come upon him. He was in the downstairs lounge at the moment, and he had a glass in his hand, and he was so much astonished that he drank off its contents in one gulp, and almost choked himself.

"Good Lord!" he thought. "Letty Ellington!—and here! I'd as soon have thought of seeing old Stephen, or my fair—or unlovely—Marcia. What is up?"

He was so full of perplexity at this unexpected happening that he ordered another drink, and sat over it in a corner meditating on what this might mean. By the time he had finished it, his natural inquisitiveness had so developed that he felt himself obliged to ascertain the exact whereabouts of the two ladies. There was a fact that puzzled him—under the rules of the Amaranth, members were not permitted to introduce friends. Now, Avory was certain that Letty Ellington was not a member of the club. She was brought in there, then, by Hilda Tressingham. But, how did Hilda Tressingham contrive to evade a strict rule? There must be some

particular reason, some sanction. But whose sanction? and what reason? Then, with a sudden flash of intuition, Avory saw. The sanction came from Barthelemy. But the reason was—what?

He was going upstairs to prospect around the rooms, and see what Hilda and Letty Ellington were doing, when a new idea sent him back to his corner. He himself did not wish Letty to see him there—not that he was afraid of being seen there, for he had already told Marcia that he was a member of the Amaranth, which he frequented, he said, in order to pick up characters for a play he was writing, but because he thought it might spoil whatever game was going forward if Letty knew that so close a friend of Marcia Ellington's was at hand. And just then there came into the lounge a club servant whom Avory had more than once employed on little errands and had always judiciously tipped. This man he beckoned to approach.

"You know Mrs. Tressingham?" he said quietly.

"Honourable Mrs. Tressingham—yes, sir," replied the man.

"She's upstairs, somewhere," said Avory. He slipped money into the man's hand. "Just make it in your way to go up and look round—quietly, you know—and come back and tell me if she's engaged with anybody."

The man nodded understandingly, and went off. In five minutes he was back. "Having supper with another lady and with Mr. Barthelemy and Mr. von Roon, sir," he whispered. "In that little alcove, sir, that Mr. Barthelemy keeps for himself."

"All right," said Avory.

He sat in his corner for a long time—until he thought the four upstairs must have supped. Then he strolled up, and, using his own methods of spying without seeming to spy, made a careful examination of every room in the club. There was no Mrs. Tressingham in them, nor Mrs. Ellington; no Mr. Barthelemy, no Otto von Roon—of that fact he convinced himself.

Avory went down again, and took up his post in the lounge. Two o'clock came, and everybody left. But Mrs. Tressingham and Mrs. Ellington and Otto von Roon did not leave. He went out then, crossed the street, and lounged about. At half-past two these three people appeared—but from Mr. Barthelemy's private house. Von Roon put the ladies into a taxi-cab which had been summoned; when they had gone, he turned and re-entered the door from which he had just emerged.

CHAPTER XVI

FACE TO FACE

For a few minutes Avory paced up and down the street, now grown quiet and deserted. Von Roon had gone into Barthelemy's house, and the door had closed upon him. There were no lights to be seen in any of the windows. But Avory knew that the two men of whom he was just then thinking were somewhere within that house. And he was not only thinking of them—he meant to have speech of them. For Avory was by no means destitute of courage, and he was sharp-witted enough to seize an opportunity when he saw one.

But before he crossed the street in the endeavour to see Von Roon and the proprietor of the Amaranth, Avory had something to do. He swiftly considered matters, and then turned and ran to Jermyn Street and up the stairs to Banister King's chambers. He had a word or two for Banister King—some intuition, some sense of precaution prompted him to let King know what he was about to do or attempt to do. He did not know what might await him in Barthelemy's house, and he had that to say to Barthelemy and to Von Roon which might bring an element of personal danger into his call there—if that call ended in his being admitted. He therefore wished Banister King to know where he was going.

Banister King was out. At any rate he made no reply to the repeated appeals for admission which Avory made at his portals. And remembering his friend's eccentricities, and that he might be out of town, Avory wasted no time. He pulled out a card, scribbled a few lines on it, and thrust it into King's letter-box. Then he darted down the stairs and back to Barthelemy's house, at top speed.

The house looked just as he had left it. There was not a sign of life about it. It bore that eminently virtuous look which all respectable residences should bear at half-past two o'clock in the morning—that is, it looked as if all its inhabitants were safely in bed and asleep. But Avory went straight to the door and pressed the electric bell. Somewhere, in the far recesses of the house, he heard the faint tinkle. There was no response to that first summons. Avory waited a full minute and rang again. Another minute passed before he heard a heavy footstep within. Then a tiny grille, which he had not noticed in the door, at the level of his own eyes, was shot back with a snap, and Barthelemy's voice sounded.

“Who is that?”

“It is I, Barthelemy—Avory. I want to see you for a few minutes—on business,” replied Avory. “I thought you were in.”

Barthelemy made a guttural sound, expressive of some unknown feeling at being thus disturbed. But he snapped the grille to, and opened the door, and motioned Avory to step within.

“This is a nice hour to call upon business, friend Avory,” he said. “It is bed-time.”

“I knew you weren't in bed, Barthelemy,” an-

swered Avory, "because I saw Otto von Roon come in just now."

Barthelemy drew in his breath with a sharp, sibilant sound. If Avory had seen Von Roon, then he had probably seen the ladies leave. He took his visitor by the arm, leading him forward.

"It is dark here," he said. "I will lead you. Von Roon? Yes, he just came in for a drink before going along. Your business—is it very private?"

"It's with you and Von Roon, as a matter of fact," replied Avory. "I wanted to see you—together. So—I was fortunate."

"This way, then," said Barthelemy, and engineered him along the passage and through thick velvet portières into a dimly-lighted hall, in which a door stood partly open. "Here you are," he continued, pushing the visitor into a small room in which Von Roon stood on the hearthrug, smoking a cigar. "Here's Von Roon. You will take a drink?"

"Thank you—yes," answered Avory. He looked familiarly at Von Roon. "Hullo!" he said. "I knew you were here."

Von Roon gave Avory a cold stare.

"Did you?" he observed. "Ah!"

Barthelemy had shut the door as he pushed Avory inside. He pointed his visitor to a chair, and proceeded to help him to a drink from a decanter and syphon which stood on the table. He pushed the glass and an open box of cigars towards him, and then sat down—between him and the door. And, picking up his own glass, he nodded to Avory. Then he glanced at Von Roon.

"Avory wants to see you and me on business," he remarked tersely.

Von Roon frowned and looked at the visitor.

"Business? Well, I don't know that I have any business with Avory," he said. "Especially at this hour of the morning. However——"

"Yes," said Barthelemy, turning to Avory. "However, as you say. That means," he added, turning to Avory, "that means that you'd better name it. Sit down, Otto!"

Von Roon dropped into an elbow-chair; Avory suddenly saw that he was between the two men, and that the door lay behind Barthelemy's big bulk. But he showed no signs of it.

"Certainly," he said, "I will name it. That's what I came for. I wanted to see both of you. Very good—I see you. And don't think I'm afraid of you, Von Roon. You may frown as much as you like. Now, Barthelemy, I'll begin with a direct question: What game are you playing in connection with the Amaranth?"

Barthelemy, who was leaning over the table with his hands quietly folded before him, made no show of surprise at this direct interrogation. He gazed blandly at his questioner.

"Game?" he said.

"I said game," repeated Avory. "I ask you again—what game are you playing in connection with the Amaranth? I only ask what game, because I'm as certain you're playing a game as that I am here. Also, I'm certain that Von Roon is in with you at it."

Barthelemy and Von Roon looked at each other. Von Roon's countenance was as inscrutable as the

elder man's, and he said nothing. Barthelemy spoke—quietly and unconcernedly.

“You had perhaps better explain,” he said. “I do not understand.”

“All right,” responded Avory. “I’ll explain. I may begin by saying that I have a knack—unpleasant for some people—of looking into matters which arouse my curiosity. Now my curiosity was aroused by a certain matter in connection with the Amaranth Club some little time ago, and I’ve been endeavouring to gratify it. Like to know what it was that excited my curiosity?”

“Much,” murmured Barthelemy. “Much.”

“Very well,” said Avory with a grin. “This. That though everybody’s got to turn out of the club at two o’clock, certain persons don’t turn out. And yet—they aren’t in it.”

Barthelemy nodded his patriarchal head; Von Roon flicked the ashes from the point of his cigar.

“I think,” said Barthelemy blandly. “I think you should—particularize.”

Avory smiled. He had come to this venture armed with a goodly stock of assurance and confidence: the stock was increasing.

“By all means,” he replied. “I will particularize. So perhaps you will—both of you—permit your minds to go back to the night when Mrs. Tressingham returned to the Amaranth after having been absent from it for some four or five weeks. Eh?”

The other two looked at each other. There was a mutual question between them— How much does this man know?

"Proceed," said Barthelemy quietly. "We—remember."

"Very good. On that night," continued Avory, "there were certain persons in the club who did not leave it at two o'clock. You say I am to particularize—so I will. There was Mrs. Tressingham herself; there was Jack Hazeldene; there was Captain Dilkes; there was Lydia Linkinshaw. These four people were in the Amaranth that night, but they hadn't left when the club was closed at two o'clock. And—the rule is strict, Barthelemy. But—that's not all."

He paused and glanced at the others as if to gauge the effect of his words. Neither man showed any effect. Barthelemy nodded.

"Not all?" he said.

"Not all," repeated Avory. "To-night Mrs. Tressingham brought Mrs. George Ellington to supper at the club. That's in defiance of rule seven, which says expressly that members may not, under any pretext whatever, introduce friends. I suppose you'll get over that, Barthelemy, by saying that you're the proprietor? That's rot—the rule was broken. But that's a mere detail—insignificant. What is important is this: Mrs. Tressingham and Mrs. Ellington supped with you two. As soon as you'd finished supper you all four disappeared. You didn't go out of the only entrance which the club-house possesses. You were not anywhere in the club. These two ladies did not leave the club-house at two o'clock, when everybody else did. But"—he bent forward, looking from one to the other of the two faces watch-

ing his own, and he tapped the table with emphatic fingers—"they came out of your house, Barthelemy, with Von Roon there, at half-past two—out of your house!"

Barthelemy sighed. He, too, leaned towards the visitor.

"And what," he asked quietly, "what do you infer from that?"

Avory laughed.

"That there's a secret communication between this house and the club-house," he answered.

"But is there anything remarkable, wonderful about that?" enquired Barthelemy. "This is my private house: my club is next door. Why should there not be a communication?"

"And why should club-members come in here—secretly—and remain here all night?" demanded Avory. "Come! I'm not a fool. I've been watching. Most nights—pretty nearly every night—you have people in here from the club, and they remain here until next morning, as a rule. It's only an isolated instance where they leave by your door, Barthelemy. And to show you that I hold all the cards, I'll tell you in what manner they do leave. They leave by way of that bath place—the medicated bath establishment—next door. Eh?"

Barthelemy took his hands off the table and put them in his pockets. He began to rattle something there and he stared at Avory.

"And what do you gather from all this?" he asked.

"I gather," answered Avory boldly, "I gather that there's something goes on in this house of yours

which is against the law. The probability is that you keep a gaming-table."

"Well!" said Barthelemy. "Well?"

"Then," said Avory, "since I've found out this secret, I'm going to profit by it. That's all!"

Barthelemy looked at his visitor fixedly.

"Then it's a question of how much?" he asked.

"Precisely," replied Avory. "Precisely. Make it worth my while to hold my tongue, or to-morrow it will wag."

"Well, then, how much?" asked Barthelemy.

"Five thousand pounds down and a regular amount to be agreed upon," replied Avory with promptitude. "And that's letting you off cheaply. I've a pretty good idea of what game you're both playing."

Barthelemy rose and indicated the door.

"Do you mind stepping outside for a minute or two while I discuss this with my partner?" he said. "It requires discussion."

Avory made no answer. He walked quietly out of the room, and Barthelemy closed the door on him. But instead of discussing anything with Von Roon, he turned to a cabinet, and, after unlocking two or three drawers of it, produced a tiny phial which he held up to his companion.

"No other way?" asked Von Roon in a whisper. "None?"

"None!" replied Barthelemy. He poured a few drops of the contents of the phial into Avory's glass, put the phial away, and presently opened the door. Avory walked in, to all appearance unconcerned.

"We agree," said Barthelemy tersely. "Come here this morning at eleven o'clock and I will give

you the amount in notes. As to the further sums we will discuss them then. We shall probably offer you a share."

"Very good," said Ivory. "That's business. At eleven this morning, then."

Barthelemy nodded. In silence he replenished the three glasses with whisky and soda, in silence all three men drank.

"That's all at present, then," said Barthelemy. "Now let us get to bed."

He let his visitor out with no more than a curt word of farewell, and Ivory, having heard the door closed behind him, went straight to his chambers in Jermyn Street. He rang at King's door and once more got no answer. And, yawning and weary, he turned into his own rooms and straightway prepared for sleep.

CHAPTER XVII

REMOVED

In those Jermyn Street rooms of his Richard Avory had always lived very quietly and modestly. Although his set of chambers corresponded to that of his friend Banister King, it had none of the luxury and opulence of King's surroundings. King was a man of means who could afford to live as he liked, buy himself what he liked, do what he liked. He could humour his eccentricities, which were many; he could walk out of his front door, when the fancy took him, and betake himself to Paris, or Vienna, or wherever he chose to go. Avory, on the contrary, was a man of limited means; more or less of an adventurer; consequently he spent little on the merely domestic side of life. His rooms were plainly furnished; he used them as places for sitting in and sleeping in; he did not even breakfast in them, preferring to take all his meals out. Consequently he required little in the way of service. All the service that he needed was supplied to him by two people who lived in the lower regions of the house—a caretaker and his wife, whose name was Bryson. Bryson acted as valet to such gentlemen as Avory, brushing their clothes, doing odd jobs, seeing that their small mendings and repairs were

done; Mrs. Bryson performed the useful office of bedmaker and kept the rooms as free from dust as it is possible to do in London. She could prepare a simple breakfast if any of her patrons needed breakfast; Avory never did; in Mrs. Bryson's opinion he was a treasure to have in a place, being one of those rare gentlemen who never give trouble.

It was Mrs. Bryson's custom to climb the stairs to Avory's rooms about eleven o'clock. By that time he had always gone out, and she could make his bed and do the necessary offices in comfortable leisure. She went up in her usual fashion and at her usual time on the morning following Avory's meeting with Barthelemy and Von Roon, and she let herself into Avory's chambers with her private key as she had let herself in a thousand times before. She expected to find them empty, but as soon as she entered the sitting-room she formed the idea that Mr. Avory was still on the premises. For there, on the table, just where he had placed them on his coming in were Avory's light overcoat, his hat, his gloves. Mrs. Bryson knew Avory for an unusually tidy and precise man, and she knew that if he had left these things there all night he would certainly have hung up the coat and hat and put aside the gloves before going out in the morning. Accordingly, Mrs. Bryson concluded that Avory was still in his bedroom.

Now this was a departure from custom which did not meet with Mrs. Bryson's approval. She was a fleshy woman, and in that, an old-fashioned house, there was no elevator; consequently, whenever she came up to Avory's rooms she had to climb several flights of stairs. It was a warm morning; she

had no mind, being already up, to go down again, and to be obliged to climb once more at some uncertain hour; therefore, having pondered matters for a moment, Mrs. Bryson made bold to knock at the door of Mr. Avory's bedroom and to ask that gentleman if he was poorly, and, in that case, if she could get him anything. For in all Mrs. Bryson's experience of him, Mr. Avory had never been in bed of a morning later than nine o'clock.

Mr. Avory made no reply. Mrs. Bryson, listening, with her large and homely face pinned close to the door, heard nothing but the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the rumble of the Piccadilly traffic. Then, having known people who were subject to such things, she thought that Mr. Avory might have been took in a fit, and she rapped loudly upon the panels. There was no response to that summons, either. And so Mrs. Bryson opened the bedroom door and looked cautiously and a little fearfully into that interior which she vaguely conceived to possess many possibilities.

Mr. Avory lay in his bed, as quiet and peaceful, to all appearance, said Mrs. Bryson, later on, as an innocent child in its cot. He lay on his right side, his right cheek resting on his right hand. The bed-clothes were only drawn up to his chin; the rest of his face was plainly visible. And Mrs. Bryson, looking more closely at that face, suddenly saw something in it that made her first gasp, secondly scream, and thirdly hurry downstairs for her husband at a rate which astonished the one or two persons who met her.

"Dead! Rubbish!" exclaimed Bryson. "He's

sound asleep, Matilda, that's what he is, sound asleep. It's what comes of the late hours as he's took to keeping of. Dead—not him!”

“Which you may go upstairs and see with your own eyes, John Bryson,” said his wife from the depths of the easy-chair into which she had collapsed. “And if you don't have to go for the police and the coroner's officer and what not, then this here isn't Jermyn Street nor us in it! As if I didn't know a dead man when I see one—and me laid out my own brother only last Friday was a fortnight!”

Bryson, who was cleaning shoes, slipped off his green apron and went grumbling upstairs, whither Mrs. Bryson, having first refreshed herself with a generous toothful from a black bottle which she took down from her cupboard, followed him. By the time she had panted to Ivory's rooms, her husband had made his investigation, and he met her in the sitting-room with a solemn and chastened countenance.

“You're right, Matilda,” he said in the whisper which betokens the near presence of a corpse. “He's a goner! Must ha' died in his sleep. Not that I never see any signs of such a thing in him—never!”

“It's been his 'art,” said Mrs. Bryson. “That's it, John. And what's to be done now?”

Bryson, rubbing the point of his chin, could think of nothing but the police. Mrs. Bryson, however, had an inspiration.

“Him and Mr. King was friends,” she said. “Knock up Mr. King, John. He's never up before one o'clock as a rule, and often later, so he's sure to be in his bedroom; knock and ring.”

But however Bryson knocked and rang, Banister

King made no answer. For King had set out, only the previous day, on one of his impulsive journeys, having heard of a man in an out-of-the-way town in Tuscany who had a certain old vase which there was a possibility of acquiring in exchange for good English gold, and so for the moment there was nobody at hand who could stand by Richard Avory's dead body and think friendly thoughts of it. It is a common fate of lonely men in London—men who live more or less by themselves, and are, in a sense, hermits—that if death catches them unawares those who find them lifeless are puzzled to know where their kith and kin are, and Avory shared it. For the Brysons knew next to nothing of the gentleman who had given so little trouble, and their only notion was to get a doctor and a policeman.

That law of the land which insists that there must be an enquiry into the circumstances of such deaths as that of Avory's, brought his sudden end into the hands of the coroner and his jury. He had friends, of course, but they were few. There was a brother, a solicitor in a provincial town, who knew next to nothing of him, had not seen him for several years, did not even know what he did with himself, save that he was a barrister of Gray's Inn, in very small practice. There were a few people of his own profession who knew him; they could say little about him. And the coroner and his jury were not very anxious to know what they could say; their object and duty in sitting on him, as Mrs. Bryson phrased it, was to find out the cause of his sudden death. They wanted evidence on that point. They wanted to know what he had done with him-

self during his last hours, if anything had occurred in those hours which would lead to the idea that he had taken his life or been robbed of it; in other words, had he committed suicide, or been murdered, or had he died a natural death?

There were but three witnesses of any real importance at the inquest—old Stephen Ellington; an attendant at the Amaranth Club; and a well-known medical man, who had carried out an autopsy. Their evidence was very plain and straightforward, and there were at any rate two men in London who read it in the newspapers with great interest and looked at each other (being at the time in each other's company) with significant glances when they had made an end of it.

Stephen Ellington, formerly member of Parliament for Ashminster, deposed that on the evening previous to his death, Mr. Richard Avory, whom he knew, and who had been his guest at his house at Ashminster, entertained him and his daughter, Miss Marcia Ellington, to dinner at a West-End restaurant. They dined at eight o'clock, they separated a little before eleven. Mr. Avory was interested in politics; when he had visited him at Ashminster it had been in connection with politics. Miss Ellington was associated with certain forward movements in politics in which Mr. Avory was interested; it was really to discuss one of these that he had asked witness and his daughter to dine with him. Mr. Avory had seemed quite well, quite in his usual health. They had had a pleasant evening and an interesting discussion. Had Mr. Avory been abstemious in his use of wine? He had never seen Mr. Avory anything

else during his acquaintance with him, and they had drunk nothing but a little—a very little—light wine mixed with mineral water. He had seen nothing whatever in Mr. Ivory's manner, conduct, appearance, to indicate that he was in danger of sudden death or that he was ever likely to be ill.

The attendant at the Amaranth Club said that Mr. Ivory, whom he knew very well, came in there, on the evening to which Mr. Ellington had referred, at about twenty minutes past eleven o'clock. He seemed to be in quite his usual health. He remained in a lounge which opened off the entrance hall until past midnight reading the evening newspapers. He did not go into the supper-room that night. He remarked to witness that he had dined a little later than usual, and he asked witness to bring him a beef sandwich, which he did soon after midnight. Mr. Ivory had a whisky-and-potash with that. He never saw him have anything further. He was away upstairs in the smoking-rooms and reception-rooms for a while after he had eaten his sandwich; afterwards he returned to the lounge and continued to read the newspapers until two o'clock, when the club closed. The witness saw him go out. He crossed the street as if he were going home to Jermyn Street, where witness knew him to reside. In all appearance he was then quite well—in quite his usual health and spirits.

According to the coroner that was important—highly important—because this witness was probably the last person who spoke to deceased. But let them now hear what the medical man who had carried out the post-mortem examination had to say.

Everybody knew that this witness was the most

important of the few witnesses called. In common with another medical man he had duly performed an autopsy on the deceased. The deceased was a man of fairly good constitution, of a well-nourished body, showing no traces of alcoholism or of any drug habit. They had made a most careful examination of the viscera in search of any trace of poison and had found none whatever. In fact, there was nothing whatever in the body to suggest that poison of any sort had been administered or taken. But he and his associate had found traces of heart weakness; there were signs—unmistakable signs—of valvular trouble. They had come to the conclusion that the deceased had died in his sleep through sudden heart failure.

“You have no doubt about that?” asked the coroner, laying special emphasis on his question for the benefit of the jurymen.

The witness shook his head with decision.

“None!” he answered.

After that, and after listening to what the coroner said, the twelve good men and true, who were quite ready to accept as gospel truth whatever was put before them on such high authority, decided that Richard Avory died from natural causes, and returned a verdict to that effect. So there was, after all, no mystery about his death, and he was duly interred, and whatever excitement his sudden demise had occasioned quickly died out. There was nobody to be particularly sorry for his loss—not even Marcia Ellington, who had only come to the stage of regarding him as a possibly interesting neophyte when he was taken away from her tutelage.

Thus the folk who are not much wanted disappear from the active stage of the world. The brother removed Richard Avory's belongings from the rooms in Jermyn Street; Bryson and his wife made them ready for another tenant. And they were engaged in this task when Banister King came home as suddenly as he had gone, and encountered them on the landing. Bryson looked at him lugubriously.

"I suppose you've heard our news, sir?" said Bryson. "It was in all the newspapers. About poor Mr. Avory, sir."

"What about poor Mr. Avory?" asked King, pausing to find his keys. "What's he done? Broken his nose or his leg?"

Bryson groaned at the levity. Mrs. Bryson sighed, and then sniffed.

"Dead, sir!" answered Bryson. "Dead. And likewise—buried!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A DEAD MAN'S MESSAGE

Banister King gave the caretaker and his wife a look that was all the more expressive because it was given in silence. And Bryson, getting no words from him, repeated his own.

"Dead, sir! Dead. And likewise—buried!"

"Yesterday was a week," added Mrs. Bryson.

King had found his key by that time, and without comment he let himself into his chambers and set down on his table a small case in which was carefully packed the old vase which he had been to Italy to secure. He stood for a moment staring about him; when he was away from home nobody was allowed to enter his rooms; everything was just as he had left it nearly three weeks previously. He had put his hands in his pockets, whistled thoughtfully, and walked outside again to Bryson.

"What was it?" he asked abruptly. "Sudden?" Bryson shook his head and jerked his thumb at his wife.

"Uncommon sudden, sir," he answered. "She found him."

"Which he was lying in that there bed as if he was a-sleeping the sleep of the innocent," said Mrs. Bryson mournfully. "But I knowed he was dead, and went down to Bryson and says so. 'Rubbish!'

says Bryson. But there weren't no deceiving me, Mr. King, having seen as many dead 'uns as live 'uns—speaking comparative."

"Hadn't been ill, then?" asked King.

"Not for a minute, sir," replied Bryson. "I see him the day before—he was as well as what we are now. Went off in his sleep, d'ye see, sir. 'Art failure—that's what the doctor said. And, of course, the coroner and jury they said the same. Natural causes—that's what the verdict was."

"There was an inquest, then?" said King.

"Which we've kep' all the newspapers with the pieces about it," observed Mrs. Bryson. "'Bryson,' I says to my husband, 'we'll keep these here, 'cause Mr. King'll no doubt like to see them when he comes home.' Downstairs they are, all together, and tied up with black tape. Yes."

"I should like to see them," said King.

He took the newspapers which Bryson promptly brought to him, and sitting down in his strangely silent room (it seemed to him unusually silent, for some unaccountable reason) read all that they could tell him. He got no clue, no idea from them; the only fact that seemed at all important to his mind was that Avory spent his last hours at the Amaranth Club. According to the evidence of the attendant, those hours were innocent enough—and yet there was some significance in the fact that they were spent there. For King remembered Avory's intense interest in what he believed to be the secret of the club and of Barthelemy, and it required little to suggest to him that circumstances might have arisen during his absence which would make it highly con-

venient to Barthelemy or to somebody unknown, to get Avory out of the way. In spite of the medical evidence, King had no fixed belief that Avory had died from heart trouble.

He laid the newspapers aside at last, after marking two or three passages for further consideration, and began to attend to the small affairs awaiting his attention. First of all, there were his letters. Being as unattached and solitary a man as Avory himself was, King had few correspondents beyond the people who had books or pictures or curiosities to offer him. Nevertheless, he knew there would be letters in his box, and he proceeded to deal with them. Eccentric in this as in many other things, King had invented for himself and had attached to his outer door a capacious letter-box which, he prided himself, nobody could tamper with from without or unlock from within. He had spent a good deal of time and a lot of ingenuity in perfecting it. Nobody, he said, could get into that letter-box, made of fine light steel, even if they got into his rooms, for he had also invented its lock, and carried the two keys of it in his purse. And now he unlocked it, and slid back the door, and let a collection of letters and circulars and papers and odd documents fall out, and as he stooped to gather them up he saw Avory's card, and the few lines which the dead man had hurriedly pencilled on it.

King left the letters and papers lying where they had fallen, and carried the card into his sitting-room. He looked at the pencilled lines some time before he read them. When he read them he did not immediately comprehend their significance. But when

he remembered what had happened, remembered that Avory had died within a few hours of writing them, he saw that in this bit of card he held something which if not an absolute clue to the solution of the mystery of Avory's death, was at any rate a contribution to one.

This is what Avory had hastily scribbled:

"Something has happened at A. Club to-night which gives me a hold on Barthelemy. He and Von Roon are in B's house now. I am going to insist on seeing both. As there's an element of risk, if I am not home by a reasonable hour, you will know that I went there at two-thirty.

"R. A."

There was no date to this, but King had no doubt that it was written on the morning of Avory's death. He picked up the newspaper account of the inquest and rapidly ran over the evidence of the attendant at the Amaranth. Yes—Avory had spent most of his time there that midnight in the lounge which opened off the entrance hall. That meant he was watching for something or somebody. He had left the club, said the attendant, at two o'clock, when everybody else did. But, afterwards?

King reconstructed that afterwards in a fashion of his own. He might be right, he might be wrong; but this is what he believed to have occurred.

1. After Avory left the club he saw something which strengthened his suspicions about it and Barthelemy.

2. Finding that Barthelemy and Von Roon were together in Barthelemy's house, he decided to attempt an immediate interview.

3. But first he ran to Jermyn Street, and finding him—King—out, he slipped the pencilled card in the letter-box.

4. Then he obtained entrance to Barthelemy's house.

5. However long he stopped there, whatever took place, Avory came away, went quietly to bed, and—died in his sleep.

King summed up the situation in a question.

Was Richard Avory murdered?

There was no need to ask the further question—who murdered him? If he was done to death in some skilful and diabolically clever fashion, there was no doubt in King's mind as to the doer of the deed. But—was he murdered?

King was a member of a small and very exclusive club of men of his own sort—students, savants, scientists, collectors, thinkers, observers, searchers into strange things. This club was housed in very quiet rooms in the neighbourhood of Hanover Square—its great recommendation to its members was that if you wished to be absolutely quiet there you could gratify your wish; if you desired congenial company you could get it. Every member of that club was a Somebody in something, a specialist, a dependable man. And King, thinking of one member, a famous medical man, celebrated as the author of a standard work on toxicology, went round to the club that afternoon at an hour when he knew the man would be there, and, after some finesse, contrived to get hold of him in a corner.

“I want to ask you a plain question,” said King.
“If you like, I'll tell you afterwards why I ask it.

This is the question: Is it possible to give a man poison which (first) he would not detect at the time, (second) would not take effect for a few hours, and (third) would leave no trace in his body?"

The great man considered matters for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Yes," he answered. "It is."

"Let's be precise," said King. "I'll put a case. A man is drinking with another man——"

"A is drinking with B," suggested the specialist.

"All right. A is drinking with B. B puts this poison secretly into A's drink. A goes home, goes to bed, dies in his sleep. There is an inquest, and a post-mortem examination. The doctors can't find a trace, a sign, of any known poison. They say that A died of heart failure."

The great man smiled.

"As he of course did," he remarked.

"Did?"

"Certainly—but the heart failure was brought about by the poison."

"I see. And that poison wouldn't leave any trace?"

"There are poisons which would work in the manner you speak of, result in the manner you speak of, and of which there would be no trace—or, at any rate, no traces evident to the ordinary pathologist making an ordinary autopsy."

"Ah! But to an expert?"

"An expert, having some idea of what he was searching for, might find the evidences, perhaps the traces."

"Only might?"

"Only might. There are poisons which leave absolutely no trace."

"That is really a fact?"

"That is really a fact."

King suddenly turned in his chair and gave his companion a keen look.

"Look here!" he said. "Did you read the case of Richard Avory?"

"I did. To tell you the truth, I wondered if you had it in mind."

"I had. I believe Avory was murdered. What's more, I believe I know who murdered him. But if he was murdered, then it was in the way I've outlined."

"You believe that something was given him?"

"What I believe," said King slowly, "is based on something that I know. I know that in the early hours of the morning on which he died he was in the company of a man—or, rather, of two men—concerning whom he knew a secret which, let out, would have ruined them. It was in their interest to silence him, to get him out of the way. He was with them at about three o'clock in the morning. According to the medical evidence he died about eight—in his sleep. And—especially since hearing what you've just said—I believe these men put something into his drink which killed him—eh?"

"Possible. Quite possible—if they, or one of them, possessed a very accurate and expert knowledge of drugs."

"They're both devils enough to possess accurate and expert knowledge of a good many unholy things," growled King. "But, according to you, there would

be no trace—the doctors said there was no trace—so—what can one do?”

“I said an expert—a thorough expert—might find traces, or evidences. It is possible.”

“What ought to be done, then?” asked King.

“If evidence, strong enough evidence, were put before the Home Secretary, he would issue an order for the exhumation of the body. Further examination could then be made in the light of the suspicious circumstances. Even if no actual trace of a particular poison were reached, there might be good evidence to show that one had been used which resulted in death. And then—of course, you’d have to prove that the men you suspect were interested in administering that poison and that they were in a position to do so.”

“That,” remarked King, with a grim smile, “is the positive to which I’m hoping to attain. In the meantime, don’t say a word to anybody about the affair.”

“Let me know how you get on. I’m interested,” said the specialist.

“I hope the whole town will be interested before I’m through,” answered King. “But I’m only beginning.”

He was more than a little puzzled as to where he should begin. But, as a start, he decided to investigate the establishment of medicated baths which stood next door to Barthelemy’s private house, and he went down to it next morning at a little after its early hour of opening. A smug and respectable male attendant in sober black received him.

"My medical man," announced King, "has ordered me to take a series of medicated baths. I want to begin them just now. The sooner the——"

He paused, stepping aside to make way for a lady, closely wrapped and heavily veiled, who emerged from a curtained inner hall, brushed past King and the attendant, and went out into the street. The attendant motioned him into a waiting-room.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MEDICATED BATH HOUSE

Once within the safe retreat of the waiting-room, the man who had come forward to receive Banister King looked him over with a politely enquiring eye. King, on his part, looked over the man—a quiet-voiced, smooth-mannered person who gave him the impression of being a fellow of a discreet and unobtrusive penetration. He was the sort of man one would expect to meet as a private detective employed in a bank, or as an attendant in a private madhouse, or as one of the table watchers at gambling establishments like Monte Carlo—the sort that would glide noiselessly about, appearing to notice nothing and yet taking silent note of everything. And having come to this conclusion, King reiterated his demands.

“A course of medicated baths—to begin at once—now,” he repeated.

The attendant shook his head.

“I am sorry, sir,” he answered with a suavity which was not to be gainsaid, “I am afraid that is not possible.”

King affected great astonishment.

“Not possible? Why—there is your brass plate outside! Your hours are from——”

The attendant smiled, rubbing his white hands.

Smiling, he shook his head. "Yes, sir, but——"

"And you've got customers leaving now," continued King. "So you must be open."

"Yes, sir. We have private customers who come very early—before our usual time—on the instruction of the physician. In fact, sir, this is a private establishment."

King looked a surprised enquiry.

"Private?" he said. "Now, what do you mean by that?"

"It is an establishment where only private patients are received, sir. It is not open to the general public. We have our own *clientele*. If you wish to join it, sir——"

He paused and looked at King interrogatively and King looked back at him with equal interrogation.

"Well?" said King.

The attendant turned to a cabinet, and opened a drawer and took from it a card.

"If you wish to take a course of baths, sir, will you kindly call on our physician, Dr. Marinetti, at this address, and consult him? He will advise you as to the treatment, and he will then give us instructions. There is no fee, sir."

King took the card and glanced at the address, which was in an adjacent street.

"Oh!" he said. "I see. And if I call on this doctor, I can start on this course—when?"

"That you will arrange with him, sir. He will tell you at what hour of the day it is most advisable to take the baths, and what sort of baths are most applicable to you. Your own medical attendant has no doubt advised you?"

"Quite so," replied King. He slipped the card into his pocket and turned to go. "All right," he said. "I'll see this doctor of yours this morning."

"At any hour between ten and one o'clock, sir," said the attendant.

In obedience to this instruction, King, having breakfasted in his usual frugal fashion, went round to the address which the suave-mannered attendant had given him on the card. He sent in that card and his own, and was presently conducted to the presence of a professional-looking gentleman who was obviously of foreign birth and breeding, and who, after a ceremonious greeting, invited him to state his business.

"It is simple," answered King. "I suffer from some form of rheumatism. It is not very serious, but at times it is unpleasantly painful and inconvenient. At this time of the year, and in hot weather specially, it incommodes me greatly. Now, I have just returned from Italy. While there I met a man in an hotel in Florence who told me, apropos of rheumatism, that he had derived great benefit, very great benefit, from a course of medicated baths. Seeing this bath establishment round the corner, I went to it this morning. They referred me to you."

The medical man bowed. He then asked professional questions. He enquired as to any course of treatment which the would-be patient had already undergone. Eventually he wrote down King's name and address in a book, and taking a card, a part of which was already filled in in print, he completed it with certain instructions.

"If you will give this to the attendant," he said,

"he will see that the course is properly carried out. Now, my instructions to you are simple. You will make no difference in your usual habits except in this particular. You will lunch at one o'clock every day—very lightly indeed; nothing more solid than a little fish of the lighter varieties, or a very little white meat—a slice or two off the breast of a tender chicken, a little stewed fruit—nothing more. You will rest until four o'clock. Then you will take your bath. After that you will rest again for at least an hour, keeping very warm. Then"—he spread his hands and smiled—"then, after that, you may do as you like—in moderation."

King glanced at the card.

"At—four o'clock in the afternoon?" he said, a little blankly. "Not, then, in the early morning?"

"Oh, no, no, certainly not!" answered the physician. "Four in the afternoon—that is the time for you. Come back in a fortnight and tell me how you feel."

And he bowed King out with many smiles, and King went away, suddenly conscious that he had failed in his object, which was to get into the medicated bath establishment first thing in the morning.

"I shouldn't wonder if that was all a put-up job," he mused, "and if this doctor is one of the gang. What easier than to keep a medico to prohibit folks from going there at inconvenient hours? Four o'clock!—that's quite respectable. Well, I'm not going there to-day, anyway. I'll try this other tack first."

King went northward at noon, and lunched at Frascati's, and after he had idled an hour away

over a cigar, he got into a taxi-cab and bade its driver take him to Maida Vale. It was three o'clock when he walked into the hall of a great block of flats which towers high above the placid waters of the canal, and he looked meditatively at his watch as he stepped into an elevator and demanded to be carried to a certain floor.

"She ought to be up now," he thought. "She'd be in bed by eight, at any rate. If she isn't I shall wait."

Ringling the electric bell of a flat which lay in a quiet part of the block, King presently heard the furious barking of a spaniel within, followed by admonition in a feminine voice. The door opened and revealed a tall and slender young woman, whose magnificent hair was coiled in a great mass around her pretty head, whose *svelte* figure was encased, more or less carelessly, in a Japanese kimono, and who stared out of great sleepy eyes at her visitor.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"I!" answered King.

"Bless and save us!" said the lady. She kicked the spaniel out of the way and held out a hand. "Come in," she continued. "I'm all alone, for I've had to send my damsel down town. In fact, I've only just pulled myself out of bed."

King walked into a tiny sitting-room, somewhat over-furnished, somewhat over-decorated, and chiefly remarkable for the number of photographs of its owner, which, large size, medium size, and small size, were greatly in evidence on every hand. His hostess stretched a much-beringed hand to the easiest chair.

"Take a pew," she said. Then she stood and stared at him. "Good Lord!" she exclaimed. "I haven't seen you for—is it two years?"

"About that," replied King.

"Must be. Well, you aren't changed any, either. Look here—I'm making tea—good tea—not cat-lap. I've got just a bit of a head on me. Have some?"

"I will," said King.

"Sit pretty, then, till I bring it," commanded the lady of the kimono. "There's cigarettes."

She whisked out of the room and presently whisked back with a clattering of china and a scent of fragrant Hyson, and she hospitably poured out tea for her visitor and helped herself.

"Well, I'm real glad to see you, anyway," she said after a while, having stared at King as if he were some strange animal. "Two years it is, isn't it? Now, have you ever seen me in all that time—of course, you could have done, piles of times, without my knowing of it."

"Well, I haven't then," answered King, after sipping his tea reflectively. "That is—until this morning."

His hostess stiffened into a suddenly upright movement. She darted a sharp glance at him.

"This morning!" she said.

"As ever was," responded King.

The lady helped herself to a morsel of cake and began to nibble.

"Where?" she demanded.

"Coming out of the medicated baths," replied King, coolly. "Just that. You see, Lydia, if you will have the loveliest figure and the neatest ankles

in London, you can't very well hide 'em from eyes that know them as—well as mine do."

King's hostess opened her great eyes; her lips parted to show the pearly teeth which half the world knew from photographs and she first smiled and then laughed.

"Well, if that isn't quite a pretty speech!" she said. "You've improved. I guess I shall insist on your picking up the thread of two years' ago, Bannie. And you saw me—this morning?"

"Did. That's why I've come to see you this afternoon," said King.

"Why you've come to see me this afternoon?" she repeated. "But—why?"

King set down his tea-cup and leaned forward.

"I want to know what you were doing at that place at seven o'clock in the morning," he said.

"Isn't it a place where people go for baths?" she asked, watching him narrowly.

"Perhaps. But they don't go—all of 'em, at any rate, by way of the Amaranth Club and Barthelemy's house at one and two o'clock in the morning," said King.

Lydia Linkinshaw kept her eyes on him from over the rim of her cup. Long practice on the stage had taught her how to control her facial muscles; nevertheless, King caught a little tremor which flickered around the corners of her lips.

"What's the game, Bannie?" she asked quietly.

"Yes—it is a game," admitted King. "And I want you to take a hand in it. Now, Lydia, straight, as they say here—are you in to make a bit of the ready?"

"What do you think! I'm hard up—as usual," she answered, laughing.

"Very well. Then there," said King, tossing an envelope into her lap, "there's a couple of hundred of the best, just as a little incentive to you to hold your tongue. Now then—tell me what I believe you can tell me, and I'll give you another three hundred—cash down, Lydia!"

The girl took up the envelope, toyed with it, finally slipped it into the folds of her kimono.

"What is it?" she asked, a little uneasily. "Say what it is—first."

King nodded.

"All right. Don't be afraid," he said. "Now then—I want to know what goes on in Barthelemy's house after the Amaranth Club is closed, Lydia. You *know!*"

She stared at him for a moment of tense silence; then, unconsciously, she edged her chair nearer to his.

CHAPTER XX

MISS LINKINSHAW COMES IN

Watching her closely, King knew that Lydia Linkinshaw had already made up her mind to speak. He made no attempt to hurry her. Instead, asking her permission with a silent gesture, he lighted a cigarette and waited patiently. And suddenly she laid a hand on his arm.

"Listen!" she said earnestly. "It's a serious matter, this. Now answer me a question. How did you come to know that I know?"

"I'll tell you," answered King, readily enough. "It is, of course, no secret that you're a member of the Amaranth."

"Oh, I suppose not—none to fellow-members, anyhow," she admitted.

"Very well. One of your fellow-members was a man named Avory—Richard Avory. Did you know him?"

"Avory? No."

"He's dead. He was found dead in bed, one morning recently. He spent his last hours at the Amaranth. He left there quite well and died in the course of the night."

"I didn't know him. There are many members—at least, a good many—whom I don't know."

"All the same, Avory knew you. It was he who told me you were a member of the Amaranth. Now you'll admit, Lydia, that there is a secret connected with the Amaranth, with Barthelemy's house next door and with that medicated bath establishment?"

"Since you already know so much—yes."

"Avory was interested—deeply interested—in finding out what that secret was. He made me his confidante up to a certain point. I'd better tell you what he knew. And, first, you must understand that Avory was by nature a most inquisitive chap, who was always curious about something or other. If his inquisitiveness happened to be aroused, he was never at rest until it was satisfied. Now, he hadn't been a member of the Amaranth so very long before he noticed something which aroused his curiosity in a very marked fashion. I wonder if you can think what it was?"

Lydia shook her head.

"All the same, I reckon you could if you thought long enough," continued King. "Well, it was this—Avory noticed that when the club closed its doors at two o'clock, according to rule, certain members who were most assuredly in it, did not leave it—eh?"

Lydia started, nodded, and then shook her head.

"I knew somebody would twig that, sooner or later!" she observed. "So he saw it—did he?"

"He saw it. He made particular observation on one special night—the night he told me of this. On that night he noticed that three of you whom he knew quite well, by sight at any rate, were in the club and did not leave. There was Jack Hazeldene, for one; there was Captain Dilkes, for

another; you were the third. Do you remember?"

Lydia nodded with decision.

"I remember—quite well. That's so."

"Very well, then," said King. "I don't know how much further Avory's investigations went. I left for Italy just then, and when I came back the other day Avory was dead. Now, Lydia, I want to know the secret of that place for my own purposes. I'll pay you handsomely to tell me what it is. And—you know me—whatever you tell me will be in the strictest confidence."

She looked at him for some little time as if she was trying to guess what was in his mind. And King suddenly spoke again.

"I'll tell you why I want this secret revealed," he said. "This is the reason. I believe Avory met his death through foul play—that he was, in short, murdered—murdered just as surely as if he'd been shot or stabbed. I believe that his murder was mixed up with this secret of the Amaranth. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she answered. "I see. Well"—she paused and began to twist the rings round and round on her fingers—"well, I can trust you, Banister. But, remember—if Barthelemy ever found out that I'd given the secret away he'd kill me. You don't know that man!"

"I hope to know him much better," said King. "But—he shan't know from me, at any rate. Be assured."

"Well, the secret's this," she said. "And perhaps you've guessed it, or some of it, for yourself. The Amaranth Club, for certain of its members, at

any rate, is all a blind, a cover. It covers a secret gambling den in Barthelemy's house."

"Just so. And access to that?"

"There's a secret way in from the Club, known only to the initiated. Lots of the members, of course, haven't a suspicion that anything of the sort goes on."

"Let's see—how many members has the Amaranth?"

"Limited to two hundred—strictly."

"And of these—how many are the initiated, as you call them?"

"Not more than fifty."

"You know them all?"

"No—nor half of them. I know those two you mentioned just now. And I know Otto von Roon and the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham. And perhaps half a dozen others by name and the rest by nicknames and by sight."

"And the play?"

"Trente-et-quarante—baccarat—other things at times."

"High?"

"Awfully—now and then."

"You've seen a good deal of it?"

Lydia made a grimace.

"Too much. You know, I always had a touch of gambling fever. But, honour bright, I'm trying to cure myself. When you saw me this morning, I hadn't been there for—I believe a week."

King smiled.

"Well, now," he said. "Let's go on. You've told me how to get in. What I more particularly want to know is—how do you get out?"

"That depends. You can play from eleven onwards. Those who stop before two leave by the club in the ordinary way. Those who go at, say, between three and four, leave by Barthelemy's private house. And those who make an all-night sitting of it, leave as—as you saw me leave this morning."

"Ah!" exclaimed King. "Then the medicated bath place is a blind—a cover, also?"

"No. Not altogether. It has a genuine business. But it belongs to Barthelemy, and it's run under his direction. And—why, didn't I see you there this morning?"

"Your own fault, if you didn't. You passed me closely. But you were so heavily veiled and in so much haste to be gone, you see, that you didn't even give me a look."

"And—what were you doing there?"

"Trying to get in—on pretext of wanting a course of baths."

Lydia shook her head.

"You won't get in—in that way. I know how the place is worked. There's a man in Barthelemy's employ—a doctor, Marinetti, round the corner. He sees all would-be patients. He——"

"I've seen him," interrupted King. "He's ordered a course for me. I'm to take my baths at—four o'clock in the afternoon."

"Just so. They won't have strangers there in the morning. And you'll be watched from the moment you go in to the moment you leave. The baths are genuine enough, of course. But they won't have people about before breakfast."

King considered this new phase.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll find things out, somehow. Now, listen! Suppose I join the Amaranth? Can't you propose me? And that once done—can't I penetrate to this secret affair—on your recommendation?"

Lydia looked at him gravely.

"It's an awful risk," she said. "Barthelemy is a dreadful man to cross. If I introduced you, and he found out what you were after, and that I had split—my God!"

"The risk's worth running," said King, with emphasis. "I'm going to run it."

"Why?"

"Because I believe Barthelemy murdered Ivory. And I'm going to find out."

Again she regarded him with grave attention.

"I guess," she said at last, "I guess you've piles of money, haven't you?"

"Heaps," replied King laconically. "Since I saw you I've come into a big fortune. And I had one before. Also, I don't waste my money."

"You're the sort of man Barthelemy likes to get hold of," she said reflectively. "Well—I'll see what can be done. You wouldn't do anything rash?"

"On the contrary, I am all for cool and gradual work," he answered. "I can see that it will be a question of time. But I'll run that man down, yet."

"Well, of course, it can be done," she said. "There's no hurry?"

"None," replied King. "Take your time, Lydia. Consider matters."

"I'm considering them now," she said. "The thing to do is first to get you admitted a member, and

after that to give Barthelemy a hint that you're the right sort to take next door. Remember—Barthelemy never admits anybody until he knows all about them."

"He can know all he likes about me," said King. "I'm a somewhat eccentric young man about town, rich, with a taste of seeing the curious, the out-of-the-way, the bizarre things of life. That's all. Except that I inherited the fortune made by my respected parent, the Bermondsey tanner, that I've come into another fortune made by a maternal uncle who cultivated sugar in the West Indies, and that, while I'm generous and benevolent, I've got a very shrewd idea of things, and know jolly well how to take care of my money. And talking about money reminds me that I owe you another three hundred, and here it is."

Lydia took the notes which King handed to her and put them where she had put their forerunners.

"All right," she said. "Come and see me again—a week to-day. But, oh, Bannie King—it's an awful risk we're running!"

"You didn't use to be short of pluck," remarked King. "It'll do you good to re-assert some of it."

Then he went away, meditating on what he had learned. Run Barthelemy down to Justice he would, no matter what it cost. It was a dangerous game, no doubt; but it was a good game and an exciting one, and it just suited his temperament. He was going to lay aside all else for it, until he won or—lost.

Next day he began his course at the medicated bath establishment. He saw nothing that he would not have seen in any similar well-regulated establishment. He was received with courtesy by the suave attendant; he paid fees which were in character with the high-

class appearance of the place; he was scrupulously attended to. But, as Lydia had warned him, he saw little of the house. He was attended from the reception-room to his bathroom; he was never left; he was attended from his bathroom to the door of the street. Into any recesses of the place there was apparently no chance of penetrating.

King spent a good deal of that week in reading certain works on subtle and secret methods of poisoning, lent to him by the specialist whom he met at his club. He was beginning to understand something of how Avory had come to his death, and how he himself might guard against a similar fate when he received a note from Lydia Linkinshaw asking him to call. He went off to Maida Vale there and then. Lydia, at sight of him, produced a letter.

"That's all right," she said. "You're a fellow Amaranthian. Barthelemy knows all about you. There was no difficulty."

King glanced the letter over. It was a mere formal intimation that he had been elected a member of the Amaranth Club, and asking for his subscription and entrance fee. He put it in his pocket with a grim smile.

"Ticket of entrance to—what?" he said.

"Ah! that's what you don't know," replied Lydia. "And I don't know, either. Well, you'd better make your entrance under my distinguished protection. When?"

"We'll sup there to-night," answered King. "To-night, at twelve."

CHAPTER XXI

RECKONING-DAY

That year Parliament sat until well into August, and members of the House of Commons went off to grouse-moor or sea-stretch carrying with them the uncomfortable assurance that their presence would be required at St. Stephen's again in the first week of October. George and Letty Ellington went to the Yorkshire moors, where Ellington Senior and his son rented a small shooting. Hilda Tressingham visited them there for a week towards the end of the recess. Since the night of their joint visit to the Amaranth Club she had never particularly mentioned that stirring episode to Letty; if she did refer to it, it was as a joke. Letty, however, considered it to be little more than a joke, and she, on her part, had never spoken of it to her husband. She had decided, after some anxious thought and consideration, that George would never hear of it. She had not seen anyone at the club who would be likely to tell George that his wife had been seen there; consequently, she remained silent. The episode, in fact, was dropping away from her mind, save as a faint memory of an innocent rakishness; dropping away, too, was her recollection of the fact that somebody or other possessed certain bits of paper on which she had hurriedly scrawled

her name after she and Hilda had indulged in the little game—so amusing, so fascinating—which Mr. Barthelémy had just brought over from Paris. And for the time being Hilda Tressingham said nothing to put her innocent friend in remembrance of them.

Hilda, going back to town a day or two before Parliament re-assembled, was rung up on the telephone by Von Roon, who asked her to go round to Shaftesbury Avenue at once. She found him and the inscrutable Metz in the midst of heaps of luggage.

"I am only back from Homburg this very morning," announced Von Roon, taking her into his business-room. "We have not been in here two hours. All the same, I wanted to see you at once."

"Well, I'm here," replied Hilda, taking the least dusty chair. "What is it?"

Von Roon dropped into the chair at his desk. She thought him looking very fit and strong; he had lost some superfluous flesh in face and body; he looked determined and resourceful.

"It's this," he said. "The time's come. At least, it will be here in a few days. So—you can put the pressure on the little lady. You have done nothing as yet?"

"Nothing," replied Hilda. "That was settled. Nothing—until necessary."

"Very good. Now it is necessary. Of course, they're in town?"

"They will be to-morrow. The House doesn't meet until Tuesday. Very good. Leave it to me. But there's this that I must know—what is it that you want to get hold of? Precisely what?"

"Yes," said Von Roon. "You must know that,

I suppose. Very well, then. It is this. I'll put the whole affair before you clearly. Of course, you've got to remember that it's all theoretical. Some detail may go wrong at the last moment—what we want mayn't be available, mayn't be there."

"In that case——"

"In that case, you can't help it. But here it is: Parliament meets on Tuesday. Now, remember that we have inside information from the Admiralty itself. On Friday next, probably during the evening, a certain memorandum, in typescript, will be delivered to some five or six of the principal heads of the Admiralty, of whom Ellington will certainly be one. It will be handed to each in sealed envelopes. We must go on probabilities. The probability is that Ellington will carry his copy home in his dispatch-case. What we want from you is the possession of that dispatch-case for an hour—even half an hour. We will know what to do with it when we get it, and we will hand it back to you for replacement intact—exactly as we receive it. But now—how do you propose to get hold of it?"

"I suppose by forcing her to give it up to me," answered Hilda. "I'm not considering that so much. What I have to do, I'll do for myself, and in my own way. What's more pertinent, Otto, is this—how I am to hand the dispatch-case to you or your agent?"

"That's settled—in theory," said Von Roon. "It's all worked out on paper. It's a Friday night. Ellington will, in the ordinary course of events, be home from the House of Commons at midnight. We know his usual habits and practices. He will leave that dispatch-box in his library. He will go to bed

within half an hour of his arrival home. At one o'clock in the morning I shall be at the corner of Hartsdale House. You will hand me the case. At two o'clock I shall return it to you. That's all."

"All admirably planned, no doubt," said Hilda. "If it only works out all right as to my getting hold of the thing!"

Von Roon shrugged his shoulders and began opening the letters which lay piled on his desk.

"That's your look-out," he said indifferently, "You know what you can do. There's five thousand, you know, for doing it."

Hilda made no comment. She rose and went towards the door.

"This precious document must be very important," she said suddenly.

Von Roon nodded.

"It is," he answered laconically. "It is a good deal more than very important. Well—we shall see each other again before this coup comes off—yes?"

Hilda nodded and went away, thinking hard. She was conscious of one important fact in this case of which she made no mention to Von Roon. That was that young Mrs. Ellington, simple and innocent as a lamb amongst wolves, had no conception of what really happened to her that night at Barthelemy's house. She had looked upon the little game as a mere frolic, a far-away imitation of similarly naughty things at Monte Carlo or Boulogne, and Hilda had done nothing to disturb her thoughts on the matter. But when it came to telling her—that was a vastly different thing.

She went round to Curzon Street that afternoon

still considering her plans and methods. She knew that, in spite of everything, Letty, like George, had a certain stubborn will which it might not be very easy to subdue. And she had no desire, now that the affair had reached its critical point, to either frighten, or bully, or openly coerce an acquaintance who might prove both useful and valuable in the future. Letty was a moneyed woman—a much moneyed woman—and Hilda Tressingham had made it a strict rule of life never to quarrel with folk who are in possession of the goods of this world. She must use some tact—a good deal of tact—in dealing with young Mrs. Ellington. Nevertheless, the thing had got to be done, and she might as well set about doing it.

“I saw Von Roon this morning,” she observed casually as she and Letty were closeted together.

“Yes?” said Letty, apparently not particularly interested.

“He has been on the Continent—Homburg—getting some of the fat off him. Of course, he’s spent all his ready money.”

Letty looked her indifference to the state of Von Roon’s finances.

“Oh!” she said blankly.

“And he gave me a hint that he thought it was time we paid up our little debts to him,” continued Hilda, eyeing her hostess closely. “Of course, we ought to have paid up before.”

Letty seemed slow of comprehension. Until that night at Barthelemy’s she had never gambled in her life with anything but counters, bought at a penny a dozen.

"Oh, that!" she remarked. "Why, what difference would that make to him?"

"A great deal, I should think," replied Hilda calmly. "I know what I lost to him and you lost more. I dropped a couple of hundred."

"Hundred? Hundred—what?" exclaimed Letty.

"Pounds—of course. I've paid him—this morning. There's the promissory note I gave him at the time," said Hilda, fishing a scrap of paper out of her bag and flinging it on the table. "You'd better get yours back. It's not good to have those sort of things with one's signature attached hanging about in men's hands."

Letty picked up the much crumpled scrap with trembling fingers. Her cheeks had turned very pale, but a bright spot burned in the middle of each.

"Pounds!" she exclaimed. "Pounds! And you lost—two hundred? And you say I lost much more?"

"A great deal more," replied Hilda calmly. "You would go at it so—I warned you."

Letty drew herself up.

"I understood we were playing for sixpences," she observed stiffly.

Hilda laughed.

"Sixpences! Nonsense! As if one plays for sixpences—or half-crowns, either. Von Roon wants five hundred from you."

Letty stared in silence. The bright spots deepened to a full tide of colour.

"I shall tell George," she said.

"You'll be a fool if you do," retorted Hilda sharply. "There'll only be an almighty row. Do

you want it to be known that George Ellington's wife spent a night at the Amaranth and afterwards gambled with men she'd never met before?"

"You took me," said Letty.

"Quite so. To please you. You wanted excitement and pleasure. And you had it, and you ought to pay for it," said Hilda. "I've paid. And I'm poor and you're rich."

"I have money, but I can't lay my hands on five hundred pounds at a moment's notice," answered Letty stubbornly. "And I'm not going to. I may be innocent, but I know the value of money. And I repeat—we were playing for sixpences."

Hilda turned her head impatiently.

"That was Barthelemy's joke. Sixpences!—as if men like those two would play for sixpences!" she said with a sneer.

"If they're that sort of men, you oughtn't to have introduced me to them," said Letty steadily. "Anyway, I think I shall tell George. He may be angry, but he'll believe me."

"And you'll have it noised about that you spent that night—as you did!" exclaimed Hilda. She was getting angry and restive, for she suddenly recognized that her pigeon was not going to be plucked with equanimity, if at all. "Good heavens!—why, Ellington will be disgraced!"

"What for?" asked Letty. "Sticking up for his wife?"

Hilda rose.

"Oh, well, there's your signature to the I O U!" she said. "You can't deny it."

"I don't deny it," answered Letty. "But I deny

that I owe Mr. von Roon five hundred pounds. People like us, who have made our money, don't throw it about. As I say, I'd better tell George all about it and leave him to settle with Mr. von Roon. He'll know exactly what to do."

Hilda felt secretly amazed at this show of surprising resolution. She looked at Letty as if she had never met her before.

"Oh, well, of course," she said, "if it comes to that Mr. von Roon, being a gentleman, will immediately tear up your I O U. It is, of course, only a debt of honour."

"Which was never incurred," said Letty quietly.

Hilda went away, conscious that she had failed. The truth was that she had failed to comprehend young Mrs. Ellington. Several generations of trading and money-making had gone to the manufacture of Letty. She was not going to hand over five hundred pounds without reason. And she had a greater appreciation of a tradesman's bill than she had of what Mrs. Tressingham called a debt of honour.

Still, something had to be done, and she must do it quickly. One thing was certain—Letty must not tell her husband of this matter. So in an hour's time, Hilda went back to Hartsdale House, and finding Letty still alone, produced another crumpled scrap of paper.

"There is your I O U," she said. "Of course, under the circumstances, Mr. von Roon returns it to you. So that's the end of—that."

"Scarcely," said Letty. She, too, produced a slip of paper. "I owe Mr. von Roon—or somebody—five hundred sixpences. That's twelve pounds ten.

There's a cheque for it—made payable to bearer. As you had the I O U you'll take this, won't you?"

Hilda gave young Mrs. Ellington a look, and walked out of the room and the house. And yet, she said to herself, she had had all the worst of the reckoning day.

CHAPTER XXII

BACK STAIRS

Once alone, in her Down Street flat, Hilda proceeded to face the situation in all its phases. She recognized that she had failed, signally and completely, as regarded her designs on Letty Ellington. It had come as a surprise to her that Letty should turn to her husband as a means of defence—Hilda speculated, not without sorrow, on the fact that she had never met that sort of young woman before. It had been a revelation to her to discover such a phenomenon—a woman who was not afraid to go to her husband and tell everything. She knew now that there was no chance, and never had been any chance, of getting at George Ellington's dispatch-box through his wife, simple and innocent as she seemed.

But if Hilda was to earn the five thousand pounds which Von Roon had promised her, if she was to recover from him certain bits of paper bearing her name at their foot, she would have to secure that dispatch-box by some means. They would have to be foul means, of course—she was prepared for that. There was no fair way of doing the thing. The only matter which concerned her was—what was the best, the easiest way of doing it? She was not the sort of woman to stick at trifles, but she possessed a very

keen sense of personal safety, and she cudgelled her brains in an endeavour to beat out of them some plan which would enable her to achieve the object and yet leave her out of danger. All sorts of projects and schemes of mischief floated before her vision, mingling with the smoke of the cigarettes which she lighted one from another. But at the end of the morning she was no nearer a solution of the difficulty than she had been at its beginning, and she threw away a final cigarette with a gesture of vexation.

"I suppose I shall have to fall back on Parminter," she mused. "And Parminter will then want to blackmail me."

More reflection showed her that Parminter was, after all, her only hope; under the circumstances, indeed, Parminter was a highly convenient person to fall back upon. When the Ellingtons settled down in Hartsdale House, Letty wanted a maid; Hilda, carrying out her rôle of universal provider to them, volunteered to find one for her, and produced the desired article in the shape of Susan Parminter, who had at one time been in her own employ, and was eminently suited to Mrs. Ellington's requirements. Parminter was just then out of place; it only required a word from Mrs. Tressingham to secure her, and Hilda spoke the word readily. There, then, in Hartsdale House, a tool ready to hand, was Parminter, and after thinking over a thousand schemes, until she was dizzy and weary with inventing and planning, Hilda decided to make use of her.

"It will be a slice out of my share," she reflected, grumblingly; "but it can't be helped. I shall have to make the best bargain I can."

And acting on the business-like principle that if a thing has got to be done it is best to do it at once, Hilda sent off a note to Susan Parminter requesting her to call upon her at a certain hour wherein she knew the maid would be free.

"There'll be no difficulty about Parminter," she reflected, the note being duly dispatched. "Fortunately, she's a genius for intrigue, and she's crammed full of avarice. All that's necessary is to make a bargain."

Parminter kept the appointment to the minute, conscious and confident that something was in the air. She had been born and bred on the Hartsdale estate, and she knew a good deal of Mrs. Tressingham's private affairs, and had often acted as go-between in some of them. Moreover, being an utterly unscrupulous person herself, she had a certain admiration for Hilda's genius for planning and plotting, and was always ready to take a hand in any game that was going forward, provided it was a safe and profitable one. And Hilda, watching her as she turned her bold, black, enquiring eyes on her former mistress, knew that she was a capable assistant to get hold of, and would do her best in whatever task she was asked to accomplish. With business-like directness she went straight to the point.

"Parminter," she said, "do you want to earn some money?"

Parminter's thin, straight lips assumed a smile which was more grim than humorous.

"I've always been of a saving disposition, Mrs. Tressingham," she replied.

"And I suppose you and Waters have still got

your scheme of starting a boarding-house when you've saved the necessary capital?" asked Hilda.

Parminter nodded and smiled again—more grimly, if anything.

"When me and Waters have saved—well, there's no need for concealment with you, Mrs. Tressingham—when we've saved two thousand, then we shall marry, and we shall start," she answered. "We know of the very place—down Bayswater way."

"Well, you can earn something towards it by doing something for me," said Hilda. "But remember this, Parminter—it's to be one transaction. When I pay you for what you've done, that'll be the end. There's to be no coming to me afterwards with requests for more."

Parminter's black eyes became expressionless.

"What might it be?" she asked quietly.

Hilda thought for a moment and then spoke candidly.

"I'll tell you," she answered. "On Friday night next, I want to be in Mr. Ellington's study—you know the room I mean—that at the corner of the house—from a few minutes before one o'clock in the morning until a few minutes after two. It's no concern of yours what I want there. All I want you to do is to arrange for my getting into and getting out of that house unobserved."

Parminter screwed up her lips and looked gravely ruminative.

"You know all the habits of the household," added Hilda. "You can manage that easily, Parminter."

"How?" asked Parminter with promptitude.

"How, Mrs. Tressingham?"

"By leaving a door unfastened," replied Hilda. Parminter shook her head.

"I'm not so sure about that," she remarked. "It's quite true that I do know the habits of the household, and that's just why I am not sure. There's only one door that I could unfasten—that's the door into the side street."

"The door I thought of," remarked Hilda.

"Yes—and close to that door, as you know, Mrs. Tressingham, is the butler's pantry, and Jarvis, the butler, sleeps in it," said Parminter. "How am I to get down and unfasten that by one o'clock? He never goes to bed before half-past twelve, and I've often heard him say that he's a light sleeper. No, I don't see that I could do it that way. But——" She paused and looked at Hilda in a convincing fashion.

"Well—what?" asked Hilda impatiently.

Parminter hesitated. She changed her look of consideration to one of furtive shyness, and her thin lips began to smile again.

"If you just want to get in and out of the house and go into the study at the times you mention," she said, "and if you're certain that there'll be no questions asked of any of us——"

"The first is all I want, and of the second I'm quite certain," said Hilda.

"Well, in that case," continued Parminter, still smiling suggestively, "in that case, I—I could square Jarvis. If——"

"If what? Speak out!" said Hilda.

"If you give me the money to do it with, of course," concluded Parminter.

"Safely?"

"Safely. Jarvis is leaving. And—he's to be squared. I can square him. So long as he's assured that no questions will be asked of him I can arrange matters with him—for cash."

Hilda meditated upon this offer for a minute or two. After all, she had always known that dirty, mean, and underhand methods would have to be resorted to if she was to gain possession of the dispatch-box and this seemed to be as convenient a way as any.

"I don't want my name mentioned to Jarvis," she said suddenly.

"No need," answered Parminter. "I'll make things right with him. He'll do anything I ask—for a consideration."

"We'd better decide what you are to ask," said Hilda.

"That's simple," observed Parminter. "He's to leave the side door unfastened that night until half-past two in the morning, and to see that it will open without noise—eh?"

"Yes. That would do," answered Hilda. "That would be capital."

"You only want to go into the study?" asked Parminter. "Nowhere else?"

"Nowhere else. Of course, once inside the house I can find my way to the study blindfold," replied Hilda.

"And you won't want to turn on any great light, or to do anything that would attract attention?"

"Nothing. If you can arrange matters, I shall come and go so quietly that nobody will ever know

—not even Jarvis, if he'll keep within his own room."

Parminster made a suggestive movement of her right hand.

"You'd better give me some money for him," she said quietly.

Hilda had anticipated some such demand as this, and had taken the precaution to provide herself with a certain amount in banknotes. She crossed over to her bureau and unlocked a drawer.

"Remember, Parminster," she said, with a business-like determination, "the cheaper you get him the better for yourself."

Parminster's grim smile came into being again.

"All the same," she said, "I'd better be provided. Jarvis knows the market value of this sort of business as well as anybody."

"And, like you, it'll have to be a once-and-for-all transaction," said Hilda. "I'm not going to be blackmailed by either you or him. Remember, you'll be accomplices."

"I'm remembering everything," replied Parminster, "and I wouldn't have anything to do with it if I didn't know that so long as I square Jarvis, it can be done easily."

Hilda counted out some banknotes and passed them over.

"You ought to have quite enough there," she said, eyeing the maid. "Quite enough—ample!"

Parminster also counted the notes, fingering them as a bird of prey might let its talons pick and tear amongst some tit-bits which it ardently desired but must first trifle with.

"We'll see," she said. "I'll do my best. He's

not unreasonable, Jarvis; but, of course, he's the right to make the most of a good opportunity. I'll do what I can with him. And, now"—she thrust the notes away into some safe corner of her attire and turned to Hilda with a sinister eagerness—"what about me?"

Hilda faced the inevitable.

"Well, how much?" she asked with an assumption of carelessness. "Bear in mind what I said. There'll be nothing afterwards."

"Quite so," said Parminter. "So I must have my price settled. I want five hundred pounds, Mrs. Tressingham."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Hilda. "That's robbery."

"That's my price," said Parminter calmly. "As to robbery, I don't know what you want in that study, and it doesn't concern me. But I've a pretty good idea that you're after some of those Government papers, and that you can very well afford to pay me for helping you. And as I said before, my price is five hundred pounds—not one penny less, Mrs. Tressingham."

"I've done a good deal for you, Parminter, one way and another," said Hilda, "and it's an extortionate price!"

"Maybe," replied Parminter, "but it'll just make up the two thousand pounds that Waters and me need for getting married and starting that boarding-house in Bayswater. You'd better give me an open cheque, Mrs. Tressingham."

Hilda had no choice. So that part of the affair was settled, and before evening she knew that Jarvis was amenable. There was nothing to do then but to arrange with Von Roon to be at the side window

of Hartsdale House on the fateful night, to receive the dispatch-box from her and to hand it back when he had done with it. They had already arranged that he was to examine its contents at Hilda's rooms in Down Street. Von Roon could hasten there with it, open it, do what he wanted, and hasten back. It might be that as much as an hour would not be necessary. But as they completed their arrangements she laughed.

"It's a queer thing," she said. "The only thing I hate and dislike about this adventure is—what do you think?"

"Can't think," answered Von Roon.

"It's the forced waiting in that house between your taking the thing away and bringing it back," she said. "That waiting will be enough to drive me—mad!"

CHAPTER XXIII

UNDER SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

On that Friday night—a night which was to be more fateful and eventful to him than he dreamed of—George Ellington went home to Curzon Street all unconscious that he was the victim of more plots than one. He had no idea that his movements had been watched and noted all the afternoon from the time he left the Admiralty to the moment he left the House of Commons. It never entered his thoughts that watchful eyes were keeping a strict observation on the small dispatch-box which he had carried about with him for hours; that those same eyes assured themselves that it was in his hand when he stepped out of his motor-brougham and entered Hartsdale House. He entered all unconscious, all unsuspecting, placed his dispatch-box where he always placed it—on a certain part of his desk—and dismissed it and the affairs of the day from his mind. Years before, his father, whose shrewdness he had more respect for than he ever openly admitted, had laid it down to him as a sound rule of life that when a man comes into his house for the night's rest, he should leave all business affairs and worries on the doorstep. Old Ellington had quoted various examples to him—that of Mr. Gladstone for one of them—and George had

sufficient appreciation of those examples to be emulous of following them. Therefore, when he left his study that midnight he left all thought of State papers and State secrets behind its door. He went into his dining-room, ate a sandwich and sipped the one glass of whisky and soda which he allowed himself, and, having smoked half a cigarette, yawned and went to bed. Sometimes, when he came in from the House, he sat up and read; sometimes he found Letty inclined for half an hour's light chat. But on this particular night Letty was away from town—gone down to Ashminster for the week-end—whither George was to follow her next day. Marcia, it was true, was in the house, and was still in evidence, having only just come in from a lecture which she had been giving somewhere in the wilds of East Ham. But George had no desire to hold converse with his sister at that hour of the night. Marcia, after one of her lecture evenings, was always inclined to be politically pugnacious and to develop great mental activity of the controversial order. She threw out a hint or two on this occasion of her disposition to talk if her brother was similarly disposed, but George made no response. He took his candle, and Marcia took hers, and by half-past twelve Hartsdale House was in darkness and quietude.

As a rule a very sound sleeper, George Ellington had of late developed a tendency to a mild form of insomnia. It was beginning to worry him. He had contracted a habit of dropping off to sleep as soon as his head touched the pillow and of waking quite suddenly at two o'clock in the morning. He had already consulted his doctor about it, and under his

advice was practising some simple remedies which so far had given him no assistance. On this night he went to sleep as usual; as had become almost usual, he woke with a sudden start, and looking at his watch found that it was just two o'clock—also as usual. He knew then that he was in for a good hour's wakefulness, and he turned to the table at the side of his bed for a book which he was reading in these unpleasant night watches—a good, heavy book that inclined to soporific inducements. Then he remembered that wanting to verify a quotation in it, he had carried it down to his study the previous morning, and he slipped on a dressing-gown and went to fetch it.

The passages and staircases of Hartsdale House were thickly carpeted, and George, in his slippers, made no sound in traversing them. Knowing his way quite accurately, he took no light with him. And half-way down the staircase which led into the hall he suddenly became aware of a mere speck of light which shone in the darkness at the foot. He knew at once what it was: there was a light in his study, and this was a gleam, a mere speck of it, shining through the narrow aperture of the keyhole.

George Ellington was one of those men who become coolly unconcerned in the presence of sudden surprise. One hand on the rail of the staircase, he pulled himself up, and stood for a second or two staring at the minute speck of light. Suddenly it went out; everything before him was blackness. He moved forward then, moved rapidly and decisively. There was somebody in that room; burglars, most probably. He had no fear of them, nor of anything;

he had no thought of summoning help, of arousing Jarvis in his butler's pantry. He possessed a revolver, and it amused him to think that at that moment it was lying in one of the drawers of his desk in that very room—unloaded, of course. But even if it had been resting, loaded and serviceable, in a pocket of his dressing-gown, he knew very well that he would not have drawn it out. And as he moved to the door of the study he realized that his chief feeling at that moment was one of sheer curiosity. He was wondering how, whoever it was that was in that room, had got there and what his or her object was.

He opened the door of the study with a sudden noiseless movement, and in the same moment pressed the switch which turned on the electric light. And there, standing immediately before him, so close to him that by putting out a hand he could have touched her, he saw Hilda Tressingham. For a brief second these two looked at each other, silently. They looked into each other's eyes. The man saw surprise, anger, perhaps a little defiance, in the woman's; the woman saw sheer astonishment and questioning in the man's. But her eyes shifted their glance first; she looked down and away, and unconsciously she moved back. And George Ellington still watching her, slipped his hand behind him, and turning a key in the door, drew it out and dropped it into his pocket.

"Mrs. Tressingham!" he said softly, "Mrs. Tressingham!"

Hilda suddenly turned round on him. She had shrunk back, abashed: now she faced him, resolute.

"Open that door!" she demanded. "I want to go out!"

Ellington shook his head.

"No," he answered, "that must—wait! Hadn't you better sit down?"

He pointed to a chair and at the same time moved swiftly to his desk. The dispatch-box was lying exactly where he had laid it. He lifted it up, examining its exterior. From a drawer within a drawer of his desk he produced a key, and opening the dispatch-box glanced within it. The scrutiny seemed to satisfy him; he sighed deeply, and relocking the box, sat down, keeping the key in his hand. Hilda, too, had dropped into a chair: for a long moment they stared at each other.

"I must ask you a plain question," said Ellington at last. "What are you doing in my house—now?"

Hilda affected a sneer.

"Your house? My brother's house," she retorted.

"That won't do," said Ellington. "My house, while I pay your brother the rent, I think. I repeat my question."

"And suppose I don't choose to answer it?" she said defiantly.

"In that case you'll place me in an unfortunate position," remarked Ellington. "But it is one which I shall accept. I don't want to do it, but I shan't hesitate to call in the police if I do not get a proper answer to my question. You are not here for any good purpose, Mrs. Tressingham."

"You don't know what my purpose is—or was," she said.

"Explain it, then," he replied. "I am waiting."

Hilda hesitated a moment. Then she pointed to a cupboard which was set in a recess in the wall.

"You're aware that certain things—boxes of papers—belonging to Hartsdale were left in that cupboard," she said. "You know you are, because I told you so myself. I wanted something out of one of them—that's all."

"And you break into my house, or get into it, somehow, at two o'clock in the night?—for that?" he said, watching her. "A thin story, Mrs. Tressingham."

"What's the good of telling you the truth?" she said sullenly. "You see, you don't believe it."

"Have you got what you wanted?" he asked.

"You interrupted me," she answered.

"I think you were on the point of leaving the room," he observed. "You had a light a few minutes ago: you turned it out. I suppose it came from that electric torch which you have in your left hand. But—another question. How did you get into the house?"

"By a latch-key which opens the side door," answered Hilda, with promptitude, and secretly congratulating herself that she was ready for certain contingencies. "Here it is."

Ellington looked at the key and at Hilda with a glance that was disbelieving. He shook his head.

"Plausible," he said. "Very plausible, Mrs. Tressingham. I'm sorry to say it, but I'm afraid I don't believe in you."

Hilda smiled contemptuously. She was regaining her full confidence and assurance; she would beat

George Ellington in this small game yet. Besides, Von Roon had had his way with the secret document.

"No," she said. "Really!"

"No," said Ellington. "I'm sorry to say I don't. You are playing some deep game. I don't know what it is, but I'm sure you're playing it. I believe you've been playing it ever since you came to Crashaw, in Ashminster, and offered to help in my election. Let me be straightforward, Mrs. Tressingham. My wife gave me her confidence yesterday. She told me all about your taking her to the Amaranth Club. She told me what happened afterwards."

Hilda sneered.

"Your wife is a fool!" she said contemptuously.

"My wife," replied Ellington, "is my wife. Fool or not, she was wise enough to tell me of this matter. And as she has done so, I shall invite the attention of the police to your friends, Mr. von Roon and Mr. Barthelemy."

Hilda felt a sudden pang of apprehension.

"Police!" she exclaimed involuntarily. "Police!"

"I said the police," answered Ellington. "That would have been done to-day, if it hadn't been that I had been particularly engaged."

Hilda stared at him.

"There was nothing done that could bring them within the notice of the police," she said presently. "Your wife wanted a night's amusement—she asked me to provide it for her. It was at her own desire that she went to the Amaranth; she went, willing to play with me and the two gentlemen you've just mentioned. There were only the four of us present

at Mr. Barthelemy's. I know the law as well as you do, and there's nothing to prevent people from playing for money in their own private houses. If you draw attention to the matter, you'll only raise a scandal which will settle your wife's reputation for ever."

Ellington smiled as he rose from his seat.

"I'll take good care of my wife's reputation, Mrs. Tressingham," he said. "And to-morrow I shall certainly go down to New Scotland Yard and tell the police authorities what I know of Mr. Barthelemy and Mr. von Roon."

"You'll never cease to regret it if you do," she said hurriedly. "Take a word of warning from me."

"Neither warning nor threats," said Ellington. "Especially the latter. Now, I tell you frankly that I do not believe what you said just now about your reason for coming in here. I shall let you go now, but——"

He crossed over to the door, and turning the key, motioned her to walk out.

"But I shall consider my procedure," he said.

He opened the door as Hilda advanced to it. And then both stood silent, staring. For there, on the threshold, candle in hand, stood Marcia, looking suspiciously from one to the other.

Ellington was the first to recover from his surprise. He ushered Hilda along the corridor, let her out at the side door, secured it with a chain which ought to have been used after certain hours, and went back to the hall. He would have to give some explanation to Marcia about this midnight rencontre.

Marcia was gone. He went slowly up to her room

and knocked. Marcia appeared, forbidding and stern of aspect.

“Marcia,” he said. “Oblige me by saying nothing of what you saw just now. I——”

But Marcia, without word or ceremony, shut her door in his face.

CHAPTER XXIV

COLD OFFICIALISM

Men brought up in the Ellington school and of the Ellington method of thinking, are invariably men of their word, and when George Ellington told Hilda Tressingham that he was going to New Scotland Yard he made no empty boast. He went there filled with anger and resentment. He had found no difficulty in forgiving his wife for her share in the affair of the visit to the Amaranth Club; Letty, he knew, was all unversed in the ways of the world, as innocent a pigeon as ever offered itself to be plucked. But he had no idea of forgiveness for Mrs. Tressingham, and his notion of her two men friends was that they were arrant scoundrels. His first impulse had been to seek them out and tell them to their faces what he thought of them; second thoughts inclined him to decide that this course was much beneath his dignity. The proper people to deal with men of the Barthelemy and Von Roon type were the police. He would put the police in motion against them, and he set out to do it with a righteous desire of seeing both men well and properly punished.

The high official to whom he repaired at New Scotland Yard was one of those men who by course of long training and habit become more of machines

than human beings. He received Ellington with the attention and politeness due to a minor member of the Government, but it soon struck the caller that he might be pouring out his grievances to a penny-in-the-slot machine instead of to a creature of flesh and blood. The official listened with unmoved face and dull eyes, weighing and calculating. George's indignation was nothing to him. He had, apparently, no interest in the matter beyond a merely professional one. He let his visitor talk; he himself looked over the joined tips of his fingers and remained silent.

"Yes," he said, in the end. "Yes—very annoying, no doubt, Mr. Ellington. But this is not a case, I think, in which we can move."

Ellington stared at him blankly.

"Not move!" he exclaimed. "Not move against fellows like these?"

"Not on what you have told me. Consider matters—calmly. Your wife went with her friend, Mrs. Tressingham, to this club of her own free will. She accompanied Mrs. Tressingham and these two men to Mr. Barthelemy's private room of her own free will. She played this game with them of her own free will. There was no compulsion—she was not coerced into doing any of these things."

"But—to demand five hundred pounds from her?" said Ellington.

"It was her own affair that she lost it," answered the official, with a wintry smile. "And you must remember this—you have not the slightest proof that it ever was demanded from her. Whatever the I O U or promissory note was that she signed, or in-

initialled, it has been, on your own showing, destroyed. You have only her word. These people—Mrs. Tressingham included—would, of course, say that no such demand was ever made. You couldn't, you can't, prove that any such demand ever was made. And there's no law to prevent a man and his friends playing cards for money in that man's private house."

Ellington frowned. He was thinking of Hilda Tressingham's open defiance of him.

"If I were you," continued the man of routine, "I should just let the thing drop. Your wife has had a lesson. She won't go there again. If you aroused public interest in this affair—I mean, if you gave publicity to it—you'd suffer. It wouldn't be at all pleasant for your wife. It wouldn't be pleasant for you, occupying the position you do, to have it noised abroad that your wife went to gamble with two strange men after supping with them—strangers to her until then—at the Amaranth Club—eh?"

Ellington recognized that this was good common sense. But he was not going to give in readily.

"I suppose the Amaranth Club is quite a proper and respectable one," he said, "and I suppose Mrs. Tressingham is a proper chaperone for my wife."

"We know nothing about Mrs. Tressingham, and as for the Amaranth Club, we have never had the least reason to doubt that it is what it professes to be—a supper club. It seems to be very well conducted, its rules are strictly kept, and its members are drawn from the better classes of society," replied the official. "We have never had any complaint about it, and therefore we know nothing against it."

Ellington rose, seeing that he was not going to ex-

tract any comfort to his wounded spirit from official precision.

"I suppose that as long as these supper clubs, as you have just called them, keep within the strict letter of the law, they are—all right, eh?" he observed with a cynical laugh.

The official looked at him with as near an approach to amazement as his long years of training would allow him to feel.

"Why, of course, Mr. Ellington!" he replied. "We are not concerned with people who keep the law; our concern is with the people who break it."

"I see," said Ellington, still affecting the cynical. "And so, as a result of our little chat, you advise me to do—nothing?"

The official shrugged his shoulders.

"The wisest plan," he said. "Supposing you could get at these men—and I don't see how you can—you don't want to have Mrs. Ellington put up in a witness-box and asked all sorts of awkward and unpleasant questions? Of course not! You may be sure"—here the official features relaxed with something faintly approaching a smile—"you may be sure your wife won't permit herself to get into such company again."

"That," remarked Ellington, "is scarcely the question."

He went away then, angry as ever. And as he marched across Whitehall he suddenly realized what it was that made him so angry. It was not that Letty had been to the Amaranth Club, not that she had been tricked into gambling, not that she had lost five hundred pounds or five hundred sixpences—it

was that he knew in his heart of hearts that for some reason or other, Hilda Tressingham had been waiting to make, or was making, or had made, a catspaw of himself. For George Ellington had a considerable spice of vanity in his nature, and he was a bit cocksure, and a bit conceited, and therefore rather foolishly proud, and it touched his pride that any woman should think that she could make a puppet of him, to be pulled at her own wish whenever she pleased. He was now beginning to see why Mrs. Tressingham had taken such an interest in him and his: it was all, as his father had suggested, for some purpose of her own. But—what purpose? He cudgelled his brains in an effort to decide on what she was after, and, oddly enough, no suspicion of her real object ever crossed his mind: It did not even strike him as suspicious that she should be discovered by him in his study on the very night on which he was in possession of a most secret and important document wherein was set out a far-reaching change of policy in relation to the British Navy. He had been quick to assure himself that that document was safe; but he had never thought for a moment that she was or had been in search of it.

Ellington went down to Ashminster that afternoon determined to tell Letty everything about the midnight meeting. Letty had been frank with him about the Amaranth Club affair: he would be frank with her about this. Indeed, it was necessary to be frank, for he felt that in some strange fashion, and for some mysterious reason, Mrs. Tressingham was a common enemy, against whom they must be on guard in future. Before he reached Ashminster he had made up his

mind that he and his wife must decline the pleasure of Mrs. Tressingham's further acquaintance. He would tell Letty everything, and after that they would close the door on an unpleasant episode.

Stepping out of his motor-car at his own gate, Ellington encountered his sister, who at that moment emerged from Ashcroft. He hesitated, and then went to her. Marcia met him in silence and with a frown; he on his part spoke with a shade of annoyance.

"You treated me in very cavalier fashion this morning, Marcia," he said. "Do you usually quit your friends' houses without a word to your host?"

"You weren't down," retorted Marcia, "and I was in a hurry."

"Well we'll let that pass, then. But what about last night? You slammed your door in my face."

"Because I'd no wish to talk to you. I was disgusted."

"Disgusted! You'd better explain."

"You know that it needs no explanation. Disgusted, then, that you should have that woman there, alone with you in your study, at that hour of the night, in your wife's absence."

Ellington with difficulty restrained himself from making certain angry remarks.

"I might have known, Marcia, that you are just the sort of woman to condemn anybody unheard," he said bitterly. "Even me—your own brother."

"Unheard!" she exclaimed. "What is there to hear? Didn't I find you together there. It's all of a piece. Haven't you dined with her, alone, at her flat many a time? Haven't you taken her out to dinner, alone, many a time? I know you have, for

Richard Avory saw you, more than once, and told me of it."

"Richard Avory was a stupid, meddling fool," said Ellington.

"Richard Avory is dead," retorted Marcia.

"Dead or alive," said Ellington hotly, "if he suggested anything about me and Mrs. Tressingham he was an infernal liar! And let me tell you——"

But Marcia refused to wait to be told anything. She instantly walked off towards the town, with her nose in the air, and a heightened colour on her cheek. And Ellington swore, and anathematized his sister for a narrow-minded, interfering prig, and he was in no better temper when he entered his own door and sought his wife.

Letty listened to her husband's story with horrified amazement. To sneak into other people's houses in the dead of night seemed to her a crime of the deepest dye.

"I don't believe that she wanted any papers out of that cupboard," she exclaimed. "That's too ridiculous, George. If she wanted anything, she'd nothing to do but come in broad daylight and ask for it."

"Well," observed Ellington, "I thought that as she and you had fallen out over the other matter, she perhaps felt a dislike to asking even so small a favour, and that as she had a key to that side door——"

"Nonsense!" said Letty. "She's not the sort to hesitate at anything: she's more assurance than anybody I know. She told you a lie. And that door——"

I always understood that Jarvis fastened that side-door with chain after your coming in."

"Yes, but Jarvis confessed to me this morning—I didn't tell him what had happened, of course—that he'd got a bit careless about it lately, owing to my sometimes getting in after he'd gone to bed. Oh, she'd got a key. I saw it."

"Well, she told you a lie about her reason," affirmed Letty stoutly. "She'd some other reason than that."

"But—what?" asked Ellington. "I can't think of anything."

"I may be able to," said Letty. "But what are you going to do?"

Ellington shook his head.

"What can we do?" he said. "I can't set the police on her for being on my premises for an unlawful purpose. All we can do is to have nothing further to do with her. We've—done with her."

CHAPTER XXV

THE SECRET DOCUMENT

It was an easy thing for George Ellington to say that he had done with Mrs. Tressingham, but in saying it he forgot that Mrs. Tressingham had not, perhaps, quite done with him. To the mind of that astute and designing lady, the adventure of the eventful night at Hartsdale House, and especially that part of it which related to the meeting with Miss Marcia Ellington, suggested many possibilities, and between the time of her leaving George Ellington and noon, when she went to call on Otto von Roon, she had conceived more eventualities than her victim could have thought it possible for the imagination of man to compass.

Von Roon, largely occupying himself with his morning coffee and cigarettes, listened complacently to Hilda's account of her adventure. He heard of Ellington's threat with indifference, snapping his fingers.

"Let the good man go to all the police magnates in London!" he said. "He will only waste his time. They can—and will—do nothing."

"I never thought they could," observed Hilda. "But, there's one thing I thought of. Mightn't even an inquiry like that set them thinking about—the club? And—what goes on next door?"

Von Roon shrugged his shoulders.

"Barthelemy," he remarked, "is a wise and a far-seeing man. He has always been most careful about the running of that club. As for the other, he assures me that he has no fear of detection. He has always exercised the greatest care in selecting his *clientele*. He knows every man and woman who is admitted to the charmed circle: their social and financial standing: even their little secrets."

"Rot!" said Hilda. "He doesn't know mine, for instance."

Von Roon smiled, pretty much as the sphinx might smile if she could be moved to mirth.

"All their little secrets of public importance," he said. "He has a genius for detail, Barthelemy. You may be sure that he takes no risks in admitting people to his private haunts."

"He admitted Bernstein—a cheat," remarked Hilda.

"Who subsequently found it highly convenient to depart from these shores," said Von Roon. "No, no! Barthelemy knows what he is about. If anyone breaks his rules—he—well, he has methods of dealing with them. But all the people there are safe—quite safe. It is a unique place, and those of us who go there are not likely to give it away."

"There is always the risk of a traitor," remarked Hilda. "Remember that."

"Traitors of that sort," replied Von Roon, "are, as a rule, men or women who are on what is vulgarly called the make. They desire to profit by their treachery. Now everybody who frequents Barthelemy is of a certain financial standing. And we are

all more or less known to each other. Remember how rarely it is that we ever see a strange face amongst us."

Nevertheless, the very next time these two entered the secret gambling haunt at Barthelemy's, they found a strange face and figure there in those of Banister King. That gentleman, once admitted to membership of the Amaranth Club, had soon penetrated to the inner circle of Barthelemy's chief patrons. Miss Linkinshaw, believed to be a shrewd judge of young men about town, had stood sponsor for him; Barthelemy himself had, in his usual fashion, ascertained all that he wished to know about King's financial standing. There was nothing that was not satisfactory about that: King was a wealthy man. And Barthelemy, who could size and reckon up a fellow-being as smartly as any man in London, had put his new member through casual examinations, and had come to the conclusion that he was a good deal of an eccentric who lived the bizarre and the out-of-the-way in life, and desired to see and do things from a sheer interest in the oddities of human nature. He considered King an absolutely safe man to admit, and also a profitable man to know. Thenceforward, his uncommon figure, meagre face, and unruly hair were seen with regularity around the green tables whereat Mr. Barthelemy's clients sported with fortune. And Banister King quickly became known at those tables and in the quiet alcoves of those rooms for something else than his odd looks and tall figure. He appeared to have been born with an extra double share of gambler's luck. Nothing that he touched

turned up badly. If he ever suffered a trifling reverse, it was compensated within the hour by a sudden brilliant victory. He was a surprise. While he was game for anything, he was not of the order of pale-faced, hawk-eyed gamblers, who get round a table and remain attached to it as if bound to their chairs until the lamps grow low and the day comes pale and sickly. King, in his gambling, was off-hand, careless, irresponsible. He would throw his stakes on a table, go away to get a drink or eat a sandwich, or smoke a cigarette, and come back to find that a pot of money was awaiting him. He took risks that no other man would have taken: they always came off. He devised systems that appeared to be the outcome of something like madness: they were always successful. Money seemed to flow to King as naturally as rivers run to the sea. In sporting phrase, he could do nothing wrong.

"I never knew such luck as yours, Bannie King," observed Miss Lydia Linkinshaw, as she supped with him one night previous to visiting Mr. Barthelemy's private casino. "It's always there, and always good, and it never turns."

"Queer, isn't it," observed King carelessly. "But it always was so. It was so when I was a boy. I always won all the other boy's marbles; if we played cards for counters, the counters were all in my possession at the end of the evening. I've noticed it in lots of things and places. If I go on to a racecourse and take a card and mark it, I don't believe it would matter which horse I put my mark against—the beggar might be a rank outsider, but he'd win if I

backed him. I've noticed it, too, at Monte Carlo. Did I ever tell you that I have twice broken the bank there?"

"No!" exclaimed Lydia. "That so?"

"Fact. They were glad to see my back turned on 'em. And they've been glad to say good-bye to me at other places. But," he continued, giving Lydia a meaning look, "I'll tell you something. I'm a dangerous man to play with. As soon as other people begin following my lead, my luck changes. Did you notice, the other night, that after I'd had that extraordinary run, Mrs. Tressingham began to follow me, and that I at once stopped playing? Well, that's it. Don't you ever follow me, or we'll both go wrong."

"Well, I guess you haven't been any source of profit to Barthelemy, so far, any way," remarked Lydia.

"I don't mean to be a source of profit to him," said King.

Lydia glanced across the room to the favourite corner in which Barthelemy always supped. He was there with a friend or two, glancing about him as a placid spider might have glanced at certain flies who were on the confines of his net. And if Lydia Linkinshaw had been able to see into his mind, she would have known that in Barthelemy's opinion no run of good luck lasted for ever, and that he looked upon Mr. Banister King as a nice man to have about the place, being one who would infallibly leave money in it ere some end or other came. He could well afford, Mr. Barthelemy, to see a young man carry money away, so long as he was certain that that young man would come back with it.

As for King and his plans, he and they abided their time and were jointly in abeyance. He was waiting, watching, plotting—sure of avenging Avory's death and of finding out what brought it about. Nothing happened to disturb the quiet serenity of things at the club or at the houses next door. Hilda Tressingham, half-expectant of what George Ellington might have done in view of his threats, heard nothing: Von Roon laughed when she referred to the matter. Of course, they would never hear anything, he said—if Ellington really had gone to the police he had wasted his time.

“But you will hear something in a few days now,” he said, with a significant grin. “This is Wednesday—yes, look in the mid-day papers on Monday. I think you will be certain of a surprise and a sensation then. So will this country.”

He went off before she could ask for an explanation, but she gathered that his hint had something to do with the secret document which she had helped him to examine. Hilda's interest in that matter, however, had considerably evaporated; she had duly received her reward, and was handsomely in pocket, even taking into account the deductions necessitated by squaring Parminster and the butler. And being busied with affairs of her own, she forgot what Von Roon had told her—her concern with the document had been to secure it; what was done with it later on did not trouble her so much. She was just then wondering how it was that she had not heard from her husband; two or three Indian mail-days had passed and brought no letter from him. This was without precedent; the Colonel had always been a

regular correspondent, telling her everything that happened to him, informing her of his hopes and fears, and of his business matters. She was debating the question of cabling to him on that very Monday of which Von Roon had spoken to her when an event occurred which drove all else out of her mind and gave a new turn to everything connected with her.

On the afternoon of that Monday, Hilda, alone in her Down Street flat, was waited upon by a messenger boy who brought her a note. She saw at once that the handwriting was that of George Ellington; she also saw that it bore sure evidences of hurry and agitation. The messenger was to wait for an answer, and she tore open the envelope and hastily read the line or two enclosed. Would she be kind enough to come to Hartsdale House at once? The writer wished to see her on a matter of great importance, and could not come to her.

Hilda reflected a moment. She had an idea of what was wanted. She saw, or fancied she saw, that no harm could come to herself. And with little hesitation she turned to the waiting boy.

"Take a message," she said. "Say Mrs. Tressingham is coming at once."

As she walked round into Curzon Street, Hilda heard the newsboys crying the afternoon papers; she caught a glimpse of the placard of one and saw great black letters staring her in the face:

BRITISH NAVAL PROGRAM REVEALED TO GERMAN
NEWSPAPER.

Hilda laughed quietly. She knew then what it was that was taking her to Hartsdale House.

“So that’s it, of course,” she thought. “Well, I don’t care!”

She was quite composed, assured, self-confident when she walked up the steps of the house. Just then the door opened, and out of it stepped, wearing an unusually grave countenance and something very like a frown, a personage of high standing in the Ministry. Hilda knew this great man slightly, but he was so preoccupied that he failed to recognize her; he was muttering and scowling. And once more she laughed.

Jarvis, after a keen glance at her which she did not see, took her straight to the study. She had not been in it, of course, since the night when George Ellington found her there. And now, as she walked in, it was to find something very like a family party assembled there. There, at his desk, obviously distressed to the last limit, sat George Ellington; near him, pale and tearful, sat his wife; on the hearthrug—grim, pedantic, more Puritanical than ever in his straight, sober-hued garments, stood Stephen Ellington. They were all silent when Hilda entered: it was she who eventually spoke first.

“I came in answer to your message, Mr. Ellington,” she said. “And—at once.”

George Ellington looked up, lifting his eyes from a blotting-pad on which he had been scrawling meaningless figures. There was something of entreaty in the look he gave Hilda.

“Mrs. Tressingham,” he said, waving his hand to the others, “my wife and my father are aware that I found you here in my study on a certain night, and that you gave me a certain reason for your

presence. I beg of you to tell me—was that the truth?"

Hilda looked from one to the other of the three faces bent upon her. Her lips smiled faintly.

"Why am I asked such a question?" she asked quietly.

Before George could answer, Jarvis reappeared in the room. He bore two cards, presenting them silently. George Ellington looked at them wonderingly, looking from them to Hilda. Then he turned to Jarvis.

"Bring these gentlemen in," he said. Once more he looked at Hilda. "These are the cards of your brother—and your husband," he added.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DESPERATE ANSWER

It was seldom that Hilda Tressingham ever felt thoroughly taken aback, but that she did on this occasion was manifest to everybody in George Ellington's study. Her face paled; she caught her breath; she half rose from her seat. And unconsciously she spoke a few words which she would not have spoken had she been on her guard.

"My brother? My husband? What are they doing here?" she said.

"That is a question which I am asking myself," observed George Ellington, with a keen glance at her. "I don't know why they should call on me at this particular moment."

He rose and turned towards the door as Jarvis reappeared at it. The two visitors were ushered in with due ceremony. Hartsdale came first, looking bored and annoyed; he had plainly some eminently distasteful task on hand, and when he caught sight of Hilda he gave her a glance of anger and vexation. But Hilda scarcely looked at her brother: she was staring beyond him, at the man whom she had believed to be in India, working in loneliness at a distasteful task, and mainly for her sake, and certainly at her orders. She had not seen him for some time, and she suddenly realized how much her elder

he was, and how very old he was beginning to look. Other people in the room noticed the great disparity between husband and wife; the woman was young and vigorous, in the full bloom of a somewhat defiant type of beauty: the man was rapidly making towards old age. He was a slight, dapper-figured man of medium height, but he had contracted a stoop which shortened his prim figure; the old-fashioned mutton-chop whiskers which ornamented his sun-tanned cheeks were almost white; his thin hair was grey at the temples. He had a pleasant-featured, kindly face, but at that moment it was clouded with mental pain.

Lord Hartsdale and Colonel Tressingham stopped short when they saw that George Ellington was not alone. They looked at him, they glanced generally at the other people; they turned to each other. And as if by a mutual understanding Hartsdale spoke, addressing George.

"We thought you were alone," he said, in a tone which indicated that he was deeply offended by the task laid upon him. "We—we didn't expect to find anyone here."

"I certainly did not expect to find my wife here," said Colonel Tressingham in a precise, formal voice. He looked at Hilda, and made her a polite bow; then, glancing in Letty's direction, he executed a still more formal one. That done, he stood stiffly at attention, while Hartsdale pulled at his moustaches and seemed as if he wanted to swear. And in the silence, Hilda suddenly laughed, and then spoke—sneeringly.

"Your wife certainly didn't expect to see you here," she said. "But that's no reason why you should

be surprised to see her here. Isn't she in excellent company?" She laughed again, and with mocking ceremony pretended to go through a form of introduction, naming the two Ellingtons—father and son—and Letty. "You seem to have transformed us all into petrifications, Colonel Tressingham," she observed.

George started. He looked at the two men with something of an appeal, almost as if he were apologizing for the open defiance in the tone of the woman who was nothing to him but was wife to one and sister to the other of his visitors.

"Won't—won't you sit down?" he said, indicating chairs. "I—I'm a bit fogged. You called——"

Colonel Tressingham glanced at his brother-in-law. They both took chairs, side by side, awkwardly. The Colonel looked fixedly at something far away; Hartsdale frowned again, angrily.

"Look here," he said. "Colonel Tressingham has had letters—some of those d——, those anonymous affairs, you know. Of course, one oughtn't to take any notice of 'em, but—well, they are pretty serious. And so he came straight to me with them the moment he landed from India. And—well, the fact is, I've had one or two also. And we thought it was best to come straight to you, don't you know."

George Ellington stared at the speaker as if he had been speaking Hindustani.

"To me?" he exclaimed. "Why—what have I got to do with it?—with anonymous letters? I—the truth is," he went on, with a sudden burst of something that might be speedily changed into anger, "the truth is, I don't know what you're talking about."

Hartsdale glanced at Hilda; from her he turned to George Ellington again.

"Oh!" he said. "Ah! well, those letters, don't you know—they're about my sister and you—eh?"

A queer silence fell suddenly on the room. Old Mr. Ellington broke it with a short, sharp cough. But he did not speak; no one spoke. And suddenly Hilda laughed. At that laugh Colonel Tressingham just as suddenly flushed, and two sparks of fire shot into his hitherto dull eyes.

"Silence!" he said angrily. "Those letters—anonymous as they are—they touch my honour." George Ellington faced round on him.

"Your honour!" he said sharply. "Do you suggest that—that mine's called in question?"

Hartsdale shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you suppose we're here for?" he said cynically. "Of course they do. And—and my sister's—Tressingham's wife. At least, that's the only complexion I can put on 'em. And—I mayn't be clever, but I have common-sense. Perhaps you'll read them!"

He put his hand within his breast pocket as if to draw out papers. But here old Ellington, who had gone over to stand by Letty, stepped forward with lifted hand.

"If my son will take my advice," he said icily, "he will have nothing to do with any anonymous communications, nor will he listen to vague charges based on them. He will refer you, gentlemen, to his solicitors."

"Not so very vague," observed Hartsdale bluntly.

"According to these letters you've been in the

habit of dining and spending the evening all alone with my sister in her flat, not merely once, but a good many times, and thus—thus——”

Colonel Tressingham flared up into another sudden flash of anger.

“And thus at any rate compromising her, sir!” he snapped out. “Do you deny it?”

“I don’t deny it,” answered George quietly. “Of course I don’t. It’s true. I dined with Mrs. Tressingham in that way, I should think, some six or eight times. My wife always knew of it.”

He turned and looked at Letty, and Letty nodded confidently.

“Yes,” she said with ready simplicity. “I always knew of it.”

Old Ellington cleared his throat.

“I also knew of it,” he said. “That is to say. I heard, more than once, that my son had so spent his evening. I am sure he told me of the occurrence more than once. I did not approve of it—but things are done so very differently nowadays. Let me say, gentlemen, that I have every faith in my son’s word and honour, also that I very much wonder that you—both of you—should attach any importance to anonymous letters.”

“Oh, here, I say, hang it all!” said Hartsdale protestingly. “You haven’t seen the letters, sir! They’re so—so intimate. They’re written—type-written, I ought to say—by somebody who’s very much in the know, and who talks about the breaking up of families and goodness knows what, and who reproaches Tressingham here for not taking care of his wife. Hang it!—why, one letter charges you,

Mr. George Ellington, with having my sister here, in this house, in this room, in the middle of the night, when your wife was away from home. Come, I say, don't you know—vague isn't the word! they're—direct."

George Ellington's mouth opened in sheer amazement. There was only one person in the world who positively knew from observation that he had found Hilda in his study, and that person was his own sister. And for the moment he scarcely knew whether to swear or to laugh.

"Ah!" he said, "I begin to see daylight! I think those letters have been written by a person who believed that she had a mission to do some good. Instead, she seems to have done a considerable amount of harm. Well"—he glanced across the room at Hilda, and his look grew remarkably cold and unfriendly—"may I ask you, Mrs. Tressingham, if you have anything to say?"

Hilda looked bold defiance at the whole room.

"Not a word," she answered contemptuously.

"Then I have," said George. "And I am beginning to be thankful that I can say it before your husband and your brother. As they came to me without preface, I will say what I have to say to them without preface. It is quite true, gentlemen, that I dined with Mrs. Tressingham under the circumstances you have named—I now see that I was foolish in doing so. And it is also true that Mrs. Tressingham was in this house—this room—in the middle of the night, not very long ago, while my wife was absent from home. I told my wife of that matter next day. But how came Mrs. Tressingham in this room—and

why was she here? I found her here in the dead of the night, moving secretly about. She told me that she had come, being provided with a latch-key, to a side door, to search for some family papers which had been left in boxes in that cupboard. And, Colonel Tressingham, when you and your brother-in-law came just now, your wife had but just arrived. I had asked her to come here to assure me, in the presence of my wife and my father, that what she had said to me that night was true."

Colonel Tressingham's cheeks flushed.

"You doubt her word, sir?" he demanded angrily.

"I ask you to be patient for a moment or two," said George. "I ask you, also, to hear what I have to say. I believe you may be aware, Colonel Tressingham—Lord Hartsdale, at any rate, is aware—that I am a member of the Government—that I happen to hold office as Civil Lord of the Admiralty. Now, just after the beginning of the Autumn Session, there was issued to my colleagues and myself certain typed copies of a new naval program of the most important and far-reaching nature. You will readily understand that it was most desirable that its provisions should be kept absolutely secret—what those provisions were was only known to the six of us who possessed that document, and to the confidential secretary who typed it. And yet—a translation of that document appeared this morning in a German newspaper."

Ellington paused. But no one spoke. The two visitors were watching him keenly; so were his father and his wife. Hilda was staring at a picture on her right hand. He went on.

“To-day the most exhaustive enquiries have been made as to how that document got out. I have told you that it was only in the hands of six of us—only known to us and the confidential secretary—a man of unquestioned probity—who typed it himself. Of the six men who possessed copies, I am the only man who allowed that document to be actually out of my observation at all during the twenty-four hours in which it was in my possession. My colleagues wisely kept their copies on their persons. I, when I came home, left my copy in this very dispatch-box on this desk. I placed it here at midnight. I came down to this room at a little after two o’clock. And—I found Mrs. Tressingham here.”

Again Ellington paused, and now Colonel Tressingham turned and looked at his wife.

“You admit that?” he asked sternly.

“Of course I was here,” answered Hilda. “I don’t deny it.”

She was the only person in the room who seemed to treat the matter lightly; she continued to smile carelessly. For Hilda Tressingham had been thinking rapidly while George Ellington talked, and she had seen a way, and made a resolve to take it. It was desperate, and it was wicked, but it would serve her purpose. She looked up eagerly when George Ellington again addressed her.

“Mrs. Tressingham! I think you do not know what this means to me. Your husband and your brother will understand. I beg you to answer my question. Did you see the document I speak of while you were here?”

Hilda laughed.

"See it? Of course, I saw it! Why all this beating about? I saw it."

"You saw it!" exclaimed Ellington. "Saw it? How?"

Hilda got up and looked him steadily in the face.

"You showed it to me!" she answered.

CHAPTER XXVII

NOT EVEN A HALF-LIE

At these words, so fraught with terrible consequence, so full of hidden meaning and suggestion, there fell upon those who heard them a curious hush, as if they suddenly recognized that what was to come was of an infinitely more serious nature than what had preceded it. Only Letty Ellington made any sound: she caught her breath in a quick, gasping sob, and caught instinctively at Stephen Ellington's hand. The old man, stiffening, drew himself up, with a sharp indignation glance at Hilda, and he rapped out a few words in a voice that trembled with anger.

"I have never used such words to a woman in my life before, madam," he said; "but I have no hesitation in saying that you have just told a lie—a deliberate lie!"

Hilda, who had remained staring defiantly at George Ellington, turned on his father and laughed deliberately.

"Do you suppose I care what you say?" she sneered. "Let him deny it!"

Colonel Tressingham groaned.

"Aye!" he said. "Let him speak!" He suddenly turned on George with a sort of childish rage. "Speak, man!" he cried. "Why don't you speak?"

George sat down at his desk—heavily, as if some vast weight had been forced upon him.

“Wait a moment,” he said. “Let me think!”

Hartsdale suddenly smote his walking-cane on the floor.

“Think!” he exclaimed. “Good God! Who ever heard of a man asking for time to think when a charge like that was made against him? Why, it’s a case of a plain yes or no!”

“Yes,” said Colonel Tressingham, “yes—of a plain answer. You’re challenged, sir: you’re challenged!”

At that moment the door of the study was suddenly opened, and the great man whom Hilda had encountered on the steps as she entered the house came leisurely in, looking straight to George.

“I say, Ellington!” he began. “It’s just struck me——”

He paused at that, pulling himself up and glancing at the people around the room.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I—but can you give me a moment, Ellington? I’ve an idea——”

George lifted his hand. He, too, had an idea. He beckoned with his hand.

“Wait!” he said. “I wish you’d wait. Something has happened. I’ve—got to speak. I wish you’d hear what I’ve got to say. You’d have to hear it, anyway, and at once, and I wish you to hear it now.”

“Yes,” said Stephen Ellington, with decision. “That is the right course to take.”

The great man hesitated a second, then closed the door, on which he had kept his hand, and came further into the room. He recognized Lord Harts-

dale and gave him a cold nod; he recognized Mrs. Tressingham, and gave her a chilly bow; his keen face became grave as he advanced to the desk in the centre of the room.

"Yes," he said, "I see that something is happening. I take it, then, that it is about the subject we have just discussed?"

"Yes—about that," answered George. "I told you that I left my dispatch-box containing the typed paper on this desk from midnight until two o'clock of the night on which the paper was handed to me."

"Yes."

"This lady"—he raised his hand and pointed to Hilda—"Mrs. Tressingham, was in the house that night. I found her here; her explanation was that, having a latch-key to a side-door, she had admitted herself to look for some papers belonging to her family which had been left in that cupboard when I took the house. I——"

The great man looked swiftly at Mrs. Tressingham.

"What! at that hour of the night?" he said.

"That was her explanation," answered George. "I asked her here this afternoon to confirm it. I have just begged her to tell us—her husband, her brother, my father, my wife—if, during the time she was in the house, she saw that paper. She has replied that she did."

"She did?"

There was no mistaking the anger in the old statesman's voice, nor the pitiless look that came into his eyes, and Hilda Tressingham herself for the moment quailed before them.

"She replies that she did—and that I showed it to her."

"That you—showed it to her! And——"

"And that," said George, "is a wicked lie—as wicked as it is deliberate."

With a sudden growl of inarticulate rage, Colonel Tressingham leaped to his feet, making as if he would have flung himself on his wife's accuser. But the great man stepped before him with a gesture that drove the old soldier back.

"Stop, sir!" he commanded. "You can settle your private affairs later, but this is an affair of State: it is an affair of more importance than you imagine. While I am here, you will attend to me. Now, Ellington," he continued, "do I clearly understand that this lady was found by you in this room on that particular night at the time your dispatch-box was lying there on your desk with the secret paper in it?"

"Yes," answered George, "that is so."

"She had ample time to examine that paper if she could get at it?"

"Ample—if she could get at it. But, when I found her here, I immediately examined the dispatch-case and its patent locks, and I could not see that anything had been tampered with."

"And you accepted her explanation as to why she was in the room?"

"I did—strange as I thought it."

The great man suddenly drew a snuff-box from his waistcoat pocket, opened it, and leisurely helped himself to a pinch of its contents, looking all the time at the ceiling. Just as suddenly he dropped into

a chair, put his snuff-box away, and, folding his fingers, looked at Mrs. Tressingham with a glance which had once been well-known to assize-courts and to the folk who had had, whether they would or not, to meet it in witness-boxes.

"Now, ma'am," he said, with a blandness which might have deceived some unthinking folk, but had no power to deceive one so quick to see things as Hilda Tressingham, "now, ma'am, perhaps you will give me some explanation?"

Hilda, who had resumed her seat, looked at her questioner.

"And suppose I should refuse to do so?" she said.

"That I am sure you will not do. I will ask you a question. I understand that you have already said that the document to which reference has been made—a translation of which appeared in a foreign newspaper this morning—was shown to you by Mr. George Ellington. Is that true?"

"Quite true," replied Hilda with a toss of her head.

"And under what circumstances?"

"Circumstances?" she said lightly. "Oh, well, I think the circumstances were ordinary—very ordinary. After all, you know, I am not the first or the only woman whose advice has been sought by rising statesmen. Don't they usually seek a woman's confidence, especially when their own women are not—very clever? You yourself, I think——"

"Will you keep to the question?" said the great man sternly. "I am not to be trifled with. I repeat: under what circumstances did Mr. George

Ellington show you this document?—as you allege he did.”

“I must answer questions in my own way,” replied Hilda composedly. “You see, I happened, in an idle moment, to give Mr. George Ellington my assistance in his bye-election this summer. I suppose I made myself useful to him: I also did a good deal for him in getting and making ready this house for him. His wife had not then come to town; he sought my society a great deal. He dined with me in my rooms in Down Street several times—alone. He spent many evenings with me there—alone.”

The great man turned a swift glance on George and snapped out a sharp word:

“True?”

“Quite true,” answered George promptly. “But she is putting a construction on it which isn’t true.”

The great man frowned.

“Proceed, ma’am,” he commanded. “I can draw my own inferences.”

“Mr. Ellington,” continued Hilda, with smooth intonation, “appeared to desire—shall we call it intellectual companionship? He asked my advice about many things—chiefly about politics and his own career. He often discussed matters of State with me—he told me of various proposals and projects. And naturally he spoke more of the matters that referred to his own department—to naval matters. We frequently discussed the naval programs of Europe—a subject which I have studied a good deal. And in the end he gave me hints of what our own program was likely to be—one of a very far-reaching and remarkable nature. He——”

"There is not a word of truth in this," said George. "There is not even half a lie in it!"

The great man turned and gave his subordinate a shrewd glance. Silently, he transferred his attention to Hilda again, and signed to her to proceed.

"He asked my advice on that point, too," continued Hilda placidly. "You see, I have read a great deal on naval matters. And that night, when I was here, he showed me the document you speak of."

"In confidence?"

The question came from the great man's lips like a sudden shot fired unexpectedly. But the witness was primed and ready.

"No, not particularly in confidence," she answered. "Oh, no! As an interesting matter."

"And you—what did you do with the interesting matter? Did you, for example, take a copy of that document?"

"Oh, no; but I memorized it."

"All of it?"

"The important substance of it."

"The very important—and remarkably verbatim—substance of it, considering the faithfulness of the translation which appears in the German Press this morning," observed the great man drily.

Hilda shrugged her shoulders.

"What have I to do with the German Press?" she asked.

"Ah!"

The great man said no more after this sharp exclamation. He rose, buttoned his overcoat, unbuttoned it again; again buttoned it; mannerisms of

his which indicated that he was thinking hard. Suddenly he turned to George.

"Come and see me at five o'clock," he said.

With a scarcely perceptible inclination of his head he walked out of the room, George following him. And Letty suddenly followed George, and old Ellington followed Letty. The room was left to Hilda and her husband and her brother.

The two men looked at each other, and as if with a mutual desire to speak apart, withdrew into a deep embrasure and began to whisper. When Hartsdale at last turned from Colonel Tressingham, his sister was gone. He took the old soldier's arm when he saw that, and led him away and out of the house. As they walked down the steps they saw Hilda, a little distance away, entering a taxi-cab. She drove past them without recognition, and Colonel Tressingham shook his head.

"Hartsdale," he said, "I—I am beginning to—to understand."

CHAPTER XXVIII

VON ROON'S ANGER

Once outside the study, the great man turned to George Ellington and motioned him to step into a corner of the hall. He looked at his subordinate with a grim, shrewd smile.

"Plain as the proverbial pikestaff, Ellington," he said in a whisper. "That woman stole the paper, of course!"

Ellington looked his amazement.

"But the dispatch-box was intact, and the paper was safe inside it!" he answered.

"No matter. From what you say, she might well have been in your study for an hour or more. She opened that box, somehow, without leaving any mark or sign—she copied the document. Plain—quite plain!"

"But—her charge against me?"

"I don't know! Some scheme of her own. Never mind. I see how you may be cleared—of everything except your foolishness in ever permitting the document to be out of your personal possession for one moment."

Ellington hung his head.

"However, as I say, never mind—just now. The immediate thing is—action. Come outside."

As the great man stepped into the street, two individuals who, from their appearance, might easily have been taken for well-dressed men about town, seemed to spring up from nowhere and to be strolling in opposite directions in the immediate vicinity of a motor-brougham which waited close by. There was a flicker of the great man's left eyelid, and one of these personages was immediately at his side.

"Wilkinson," said the great man quietly, "in a few minutes, I suppose, you will see a lady—the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham—a tall, handsome woman——"

"I know her, sir," said the man.

"Very good. She will, I say, presently leave Mr. Ellington's house. You will follow her, wherever she goes. Take Tybur with you. You will keep her under continual observation, and you will keep reporting to me at Downing Street during the afternoon and evening. You will not lose sight of her under any circumstances from the moment she leaves here—no matter where she goes. That's all!"

The man inclined his head and stepped back, and the great man, with a careless nod to Ellington, entered his motor-brougham and drove off. And Ellington, re-entering his house, turned into a room which looked out on the street, and presently he saw Hilda Tressingham emerge and drive away in a taxi-cab, and he saw, also, that the two detectives followed her.

Hilda's first instinct was to go straight to Von Roon, and to Von Roon's chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue she went. It was now well on in the afternoon; the lamps were already lighted in the streets

and the autumn twilight was stealing rapidly over London when she left her cab and went up the stairs to Von Roon's door. She was doubtful about finding him in at that hour, but Metz, opening the door with his stolid inscrutable face firmly fixed, immediately gave her entrance and admitted her to the business room, where Von Roon, enveloped in a cloud of cigar smoke and in his shirt-sleeves, sat busily writing. He silently waved her to a chair and went on with his task, nor did he look at or speak to her until he had finished a letter and sealed it. Then he twisted round upon her with a sharp, business-like question:

“Well?”

Hilda had come to Von Roon believing that she would meet full approval of all she had done: he, she thought, would certainly understand. She had felt conscious, during the scene in George Ellington's study, that there had been all around her an atmosphere of wonder at her conduct, a questioning on the part of every person present as to what she was aiming at, what was her purpose. She knew that she had deliberately given herself away, and that she had left them all wondering why she had done so. And that had hastened her footsteps to Von Roon—he, at any rate, she was sure, would recognize, in what she had done, the mind of the strategist and diplomat.

“I have a great deal to tell you,” she said in answer to the sharp question. “A great deal.”

Von Roon looked, with signs of impatience, at the clock.

"Is it so important?" he asked. "I have letters to get off. To-night, at the club, perhaps?"

"I think you ought to hear it now," she answered. "It has to do with—the secret paper."

Von Roon wagged his head.

"That's a matter of the past," he said. "That's—done. We did well—very well. The secret is a secret no longer. And the British Government hasn't a notion how it escaped."

Hilda looked at him a little doubtfully.

"But—hadn't I better tell you what I want to tell?" she suggested. "It's important—to both of us."

"Go on, then," he replied. "And—briefly."

Now that it came to the telling, Hilda did not find her story quite so easy to put into plain and brief words. But she began it, starting out with the moment when George Ellington's note was put into her hands that morning, and she omitted no detail of it down to the time of her leaving Hartsdale House. And Von Roon sat silent, listening.

There are men in this world who can listen to anything—even to things which closely affect themselves—their honour, their credit, their position, even their life—without showing any more feeling, emotion, or sensibility than one expects from an image. Von Roon was one of them. He sat, leaning a little forward in his chair, placidly smoking his cigar, his fat face turned to Hilda with absolute immobility. His eyes, firmly fixed upon hers, betrayed nothing: the lines of his lips betrayed nothing. But when she had made an end of her story, he suddenly snatched

the cigar from his mouth, dashed it into the fire, and sprang to his feet with a great German oath. Close on its heels followed a round English one.

"Damnation!" he vociferated. "You told all that? And before—him! Him!"

"Him!" she repeated wonderingly. "Whom?"

"That man—the Minister! Him, indeed! Who else? Damnation—a thousand times!"

"But——"

Von Roon stamped on the floor.

"But why—why—why?" he demanded. "God in Heaven—why? Why willingly implicate yourself in that mad fashion? What object had you? What object, I say?" His tone was so fierce, so peremptory, that Hilda felt herself forced to speak.

"It was because—because Tressingham was there," she said.

Von Roon lifted both hands towards the ceiling. He seemed about to tear his hair.

"Tressingham there!" he shouted. "What in hell had that to do with it? You will drive me mad!"

"But, you see, there were the anonymous letters," she said lamely. "I thought—you see, I know what Tressingham was thinking—and Hartsdale, too—and I thought that if I admitted—admitted that—you know what I mean—that Tressingham would go on with it, and make Ellington co-respondent, and then—why, then, of course, I should be free. Don't you see, Otto?"

There was a certain touch of appeal and of pitifulness in Hilda's voice, but Von Roon stamped on the floor afresh, and once more he seemed as if he desired to tear his blonde hair.

"Oh, my God!" he vociferated. Was ever such madness? What—what had your affairs to do with this? Free! What has that to do with it? I ask you—what?"

She gave him a quick look, in which there was a deliberate appeal. But Von Roon's eyes remained hard.

"I thought that it was the quickest, the readiest way of getting free," she answered. "And then—then you and I would be free."

"Free—for what?" he exclaimed.

Again she looked at him.

"For—for marriage," she answered in a low voice. Von Roon laughed—harshly.

"My God!" he said. "You talk of marriage at a time like this! It is more reasonable that we talk of our safety. Marriage—wedlock! We shall be safe behind locks of another sort in an hour or two if we do not bestir ourselves."

"But—why?"

"Was ever such imbecility!" he cried. "You tell all that before him—that Minister—the sharpest old lynx in this town! You——"

"He seemed to pay no very great attention to it," she interrupted.

"Again what imbecility! Did you plainly admit to him that you—you—you had had or seen that secret paper?"

"Yes; but I vowed that Ellington had showed it to me."

Von Roon almost danced on the floor in his rage at her stupidity.

"Great heavens! And this is the woman I thought

so clever!" he shouted. "Now I do believe that all women are fools, idiots, pigs of obtuseness. What does it matter what you told him about Ellington? The pertinent thing is that you admitted before all these people, but especially before him, that you had seen the paper. Now he will know how it got out. Now——"

He suddenly ceased from his raving up and down the room, and with a quick movement gripped Hilda by the shoulder.

"Did you come straight from that house, from that conversation, here?" he demanded fiercely. "Did you? Speak!"

"Yes," she answered. "Yes—straight. Let go my arm—you are hurting me. I came straight here, I tell you."

Von Roon almost threw her away from him. He smote his forehead and groaned deeply.

"Then it is all up," he said. "Oh, what folly a woman will commit when she is thinking only of her own selfish ends! All up—and there is no time to lose, either!"

And with a rapidity and a violence that made his visitor start, he began to tear up the letters and papers which lay on his desk, and to throw them into the fire; after which he tore open a drawer and took out more papers, to be similarly treated, grumbling and growling to himself all the time. Hilda stared at him in silence.

"What does all this mean?" she asked at length.

"Mean!" he retorted in sepulchral accents. "It means that unless we look out, and pretty quickly, we shall sleep within stone walls to-night—the stone

walls of one of your prisons. If you were not so stupid, so hopelessly imbecile—you, who never did so foolish a thing before!—you would see that once you had made that admission, that man, the Minister, would never lose sight of you, but would track you down until—well, until——”

He finished with a deep groan, and repeated that with another.

“I did it to implicate Ellington,” said Hilda.

“And you have implicated me,” retorted Von Roon.

He struck the bell at his side: Metz, calm and imperturbable, appeared instantly. Von Roon gave him a hurried order in some German patois; the man vanished. And when he had gone, his master, grumbling, growling, sighing, at times almost weeping, proceeded to destroy more papers, to put others into his pockets, to stuff money, bank-notes, and cheque-book in various places about his person—to make, in short, evident if hurried preparations for a departure.

“You look as if you were going to run away,” said Hilda, half sneeringly.

“And so I am,” he said, “if there is yet a chance. But——”

Metz’s countenance showed itself in the doorway; Metz made a report in harsh, metallic tones. And Von Roon groaned more deeply than ever.

“It is just as I thought,” he said dismally. “Metz knows every detective of the political services in London. There is one of the men who are always in attendance on the Minister outside now—he has, of course, followed you from Ellington’s. Oh, yes,

the hue and cry is out now—and you must be off from this! I can't have you found here!"

"But—how?" she asked as Von Roon hurried her to the door.

"There is an exit at the back of the premises. There are narrow streets—alleys: you will find your way," he answered. "You must not go home—not for any money! Go to the club—go to Barthelemy's, rather: you will be safe there. Wait until I come. It is the only place for me, too. Then we must arrange matters. Now, hasten! But listen—not one word—not one whisper!—of this to Barthelemy until I come. Understand that above everything."

He led her along corridors, and down staircases, and at last showed her out into a narrow passage which led to a side-street. And Hilda went off, never knowing that she was followed.

CHAPTER XXIX

KING IS CALLED TO COUNCIL

That evening, while Hilda, mystified, and for the first time in her life, afraid, was seeking the shelter of Barthelemy's abode, Banister King and Lydia Linkinshaw were closeted together in King's rooms in Jermyn Street, where Lydia, having partaken of that late afternoon meal, neither tea nor dinner, which is affected by the theatrical profession for the good of their healths, had dropped in for a few minutes before going on to her duties at the particular theatre whose patrons she was just then delighting. As her part consisted in exhibiting her graceful limbs rather than in exercising her voice, she considered that she was doing no harm to the latter, or to anything, by sipping green Chartreuse and smoking Turkish cigarettes, both of which accomplishments she performed with grace and ability from the depths of King's easiest chair. As for King, he smoked a big pipe from the depths of the next easiest, and stared benevolently at his guest through a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Naturally," remarked Miss Linkinshaw, continuing a conversation, "naturally I want to know when it will come off. Bannie—naturally, I say, I do."

"Well, and why naturally?" asked King.

"Because I don't intend to be there," replied Lydia. "I daresay I'm as cute as they make 'em, and the cuteness that's in me tells me pretty straight that whenever that affair comes off, and Barthelemy's dropped on, well, he'll go for me—and, my son, for you. And I just guess that Barthelemy can be a very bad man, a real ugly man, with a shooting-iron."

"Nevertheless," observed King lazily, "nevertheless, Lydia, whenever it comes off, I shall be there. Do you think I would miss it?"

"Well, I would," said Lydia. "I'd miss it by a good mile. And I'd never sleep a wink any more if I thought Barthelemy was loose. So that's why I want advising of the event. Don't you know, Bannie? You ought to!"

"Not exactly," replied King. "All's about ready; but these police officials like to follow their own methods. And I don't quite see why you think it'll be so very dangerous for you and me."

"Don't I, though!" retorted Lydia. "You put two and two together. Barthelemy's a smart thinker. At the first sign of being disturbed he'll think a car-load of things in less than the millionth part of a second, and what he'll chiefly trade on will be—who's given me away? Well, I guess I have as much intuition as most of my charming sex, and it tells me that Barthelemy will decide that it's me and you. Therefore, on that night, I keep a long way out of this corner of the town. Indeed, as I say, I'll quiver all over, like a jelly, till I know that Barthelemy's safe under lock and key for such a long time that

he'll be safe for ever. So you jog the police folk and tell 'em that you want to know the appointed hour, because you've got a lady friend whose nerves are getting unstrung about it."

"Getting unstrung on cigarettes and liqueurs, you mean," observed King, with quiet candour. "I'm afraid they won't hurry up for you, Lydia. And in any case——"

Just then there came a sharp tinkle at the bell of King's telephone, and he went across to the corner in which that useful instrument was placed, and took down the receiver. All that Lydia heard of the ensuing conversation was a repetition of various forms of affirmative from King, who at last hung the receiver back in its place and turned to her.

"That's from the Yard," he said, looking a little surprised. "They want me to go round there at once, on most important business. I guess—I guess it's going to come off, Lydia."

Miss Linkinshaw rose, threw her cigarette away, and laid her hand on the spot where she believed her heart to be.

"Mercy on us, Bannie King!" she exclaimed. "How sudden it does seem when it does come—if it really has come! And how shall I know if this is the night, or isn't?"

"I'll ring you up at the theatre," replied King, getting himself into an overcoat. "Somewhere between now and eleven I'll ring you up. If I can't find a chance of doing that——"

"I'm not going to turn up at the Amaranth until I know," said Lydia sharply.

"No, certainly not, but, if you don't hear from me before eleven," answered King, "drive round here on your way home, and if you see a light in my window, come up. And now let's clear out. I must get to the Yard at once."

Arriving at New Scotland Yard, and being ushered into a waiting-room with which he had recently grown very familiar, King was presently greeted by an official who had also grown familiar to him. This gentleman, on this occasion, met him with a peculiar smile, in which there seemed to be some cryptic significance.

"I think, Mr. King, that this affair is about to come off," he remarked. "I sent for you in a bit of a hurry. The fact is, there have been some—developments."

"Yes?" said King.

"Of a strange nature. Now, I think we can rely on you as a man of sense and integrity—in fact, I know we can. Well, you are about to be brought into a matter which has to do with your own, but is considerably more serious."

"Relating to it?"

"Certainly, relating to it. Now, I want you to come with me into the next room. You will find there one of our principals, whom you have seen; you will find with him a certain gentleman whom you will at once recognize. In fact, the——"

Here the official whispered in King's ear.

"No, really!" said King. "Why, what has he to do with it?"

"More than you think—now. He is in full possession of the main facts of your story; but he wants

to ask you a few questions. You will have heard, of course, of his fame as a cross-examiner of witnesses in his old days at the Bar?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Well," said the official, "he doesn't want to cross-examine you, but he wants some information. He knows who you are—you know who he is; so there's no need of formal introductions. Now, come in!"

King, following his guide into an adjoining room, found two gentlemen seated near a desk and a fire; in one he recognized the high official whom he had met before; in the other, the whitening hair, fine features, and shrewd eyes of the great man who, a few hours previously, had heard Hilda Tressingham's statement in George Ellington's study.

"Mr. Banister King," murmured the official.

The great man bowed politely and looked at King's odd face and figure with interest. He motioned him a chair near his own.

"I understand, Mr. King, that you have been good enough to supply information about the place known as the Amaranth Club!" he said.

"I have given information about it," answered King.

"You know it well?"

"Yes, I believe so. Enough to speak confidently of what I do know."

"And about the neighbouring establishments? There is, I understand, a private house next door—the house of the proprietor, Barthelemy—and a bathing establishment, both of which are really in connection with this club?"

"That is so," answered King. "They are used as cloaks—covers."

The great man leaned back in his chair, folding his fingers.

"I should be obliged if you would just explain the whole affair to me—from your own observation," he said.

"Willingly," replied King. "The Amaranth Club is a very well conducted supper club, having for its members people of a very good social, theatrical, and military class. But there is an inner circle of gamblers in it. They meet in Barthelemy's house—next door. They gain admittance by a secret way from the club. They——"

"You can explain what that secret way is?"

"I have already done so," replied King, motioning to the under-official. "I have made it quite clear."

"Our men know exactly what to do, sir," added the official. "We have taken good care of that."

The great man nodded, and King went on.

"Some of those who frequent the gambling-rooms in Barthelemy's never stop beyond half-past one or a quarter to two: they leave by the club entrance, which is closed at two o'clock. Others, who stay a little later, go away in ones or twos, by Barthelemy's house. But there are some—not many—who remain all night. They leave by the medicated baths establishment, early in the morning—as if they had been to the baths. Everything is so well arranged," added King, with a glance at the police officials, "that I believe the place has never been suspected in any way."

The great man showed a rising curiosity.

"And—heavy gambling goes on there?" he asked.

"Sometimes," replied King. "Sometimes not. It depends. Now and then a player takes it into his head to do something big. But, as a rule, play is steady and quiet. All the same, I have seen enough to know that Barthelemy makes a vast profit out of the place. All the people who go there—men and women—have money. They drop a lot of it—to Barthelemy."

"You have lost much yourself?"

"On the contrary," said King smiling, "since I went there I have won I don't know how many thousands of pounds—every penny of which I have presented to one or other of the charities."

The great man laughed.

"Good!" he said. "Now, about the people you meet there. You know them all?"

"All by sight—some by name," replied King.

"Some of them, I suppose, are people who are quite well known in society?" asked the questioner, once more showing more than ordinary curiosity.

"Some."

"Women also?"

"Women also."

"Now I want to ask you a particular question: Have you ever seen there Mrs. Tressingham—the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham, sister of Lord Hartsdale?"

"Often," answered King.

"You know her as a regular frequenter of the place?"

"Oh, yes! I have seen her there nearly every time I have been there myself."

"Do you know anything of a man named Von Roon who goes there?"

"Yes, I know Von Roon. A German. He is, in some way, mixed up with Barthelemy."

"Have you seen anything that would make you believe that he and Mrs. Tressingham are particular friends?"

"I have noticed that he, Mrs. Tressingham, and Barthelemy are all particular friends. They usually sup together at the club: I often see them talking together in Barthelemy's house. Oh, yes—Mrs. Tressingham and Von Roon are certainly close friends."

The great man looked at the principal official.

"I think we are on the right track," he said. "And, of course, you must act at once. Well, now——"

He suddenly interrupted himself, and turned to King with a gracious smile and a bow which King took as a sign of dismissal.

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. King," he said. "You will, of course, treat this interview as strictly confidential. By the by," he added, almost whimsically, as King was about to turn away, "if it is not an impertinent question, what made you join this club and frequent this gambling den?"

King hesitated a moment; then he spoke.

"I will tell you," he answered. "I have the strongest reason to believe that a friend of mine met his death through that place and through Barthelemy, and I joined in order to—find out!"

"And you think you will find out?"

"I think," replied King, "I think that I shall find

out when—when the police do what they are evidently intending to do.”

The great man smiled and nodded, and the under-official touched King on the arm and led him out. In the adjoining waiting-room he pointed to a chair.

“Wait!” he said. “When I come back I shall be able to tell you when and what time it’s to happen.”

CHAPTER XXX

THE GOVERNMENT REWARD

King kicked his heels in the waiting-room for a good half-hour; kicked them, in fact, until he became impatient. He was wondering, all the time, what it was that had brought such high and mighty personages into this affair; what the developments were of which the subordinate official had spoken. There was something in all this which was much more than a mere raid on a fashionable gambling-den—there were affairs of State in it. He was speculating on what these might be when the official came back to him. He motioned King, who was restlessly exercising his long limbs about the room, to sit down, and he took a seat himself.

“Now, Mr. King,” he said pleasantly, “I am sorry to have kept you waiting, but we have been having a further serious conference with the gentleman you have just seen. You doubtless wondered, didn’t you, that he should be so keenly interested in this matter?”

“Well, I did,” replied King. “Though, of course, I remember that he was a famous criminal lawyer in his day, and once Home Secretary.”

The official smiled.

“Just so,” he said. “But I can assure you that it is much more than a mere doctrinaire interest

which he is taking in this affair. Well, now, as you have been brought into council and we are assured of your integrity, it is thought best to give you our full confidence."

"You can trust me," said King. "You couldn't be keener about getting hold of Barthelemy than I am."

"Yes, but it is not a mere question of getting hold of Barthelemy, or of raiding the Amaranth Club or Barthelemy's house," said the official. "I am going to tell you what the serious matter really is—the other affair will come as a side-issue, though of great importance. You are doubtless aware that a German newspaper published this morning a translation of a secret document, of the very highest importance, in which was set out certain British naval proposals?"

"So I learnt from the afternoon papers," said King.

"It will be only by very careful statecraft that the premature publication of that document does not plunge Europe into war," continued the official. "It is the most serious thing that has happened in a long course of years. Now you understand why the—the gentleman you have just seen—is so much concerned."

"I don't yet see the connection between that and the other affair," remarked King.

"I am explaining. The secret document of which I speak was undoubtedly stolen from the dispatch-box of Mr. George Ellington, the Civil Lord of the Admiralty, about midnight on October 8th, in his own house. What is also undoubted is that it was stolen

by Mrs. Tressingham, about whom you were asked half an hour ago."

King started.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Now I begin to understand a little."

"There is no doubt of what I say. Mrs. Tressingham herself has admitted—nay, boasted!—in the presence of the high personage we have just seen—that she handled the document. She gives a version of how she came to see it which is not to be given credence to for one moment. But—she was in possession of it—that is certain. Now—we believe that Mrs. Tressingham is merely the tool of a gang; we believe that that gang has its headquarters at the Amaranth Club."

King nodded; he had been thinking deeply.

"Von Roon!" he said. "And—Barthelemy."

"Probably—especially the first. Now, it is more than likely that these folk will be in conclave at the club to-night. In fact, Mrs. Tressingham is there now."

"You know that?" exclaimed King, showing his surprise.

The official smiled.

"Mrs. Tressingham has been under observation since she left Mr. George Ellington's house in Curzon Street this afternoon," he answered. "She drove straight from there to chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue which we know to be Von Roon's; she left that by an exit at the rear and proceeded to the medicated bath establishment next door to Barthelemy's."

"Yes," said King. "Yes—she could get in that way."

"Oh, thanks to you, we know all the ins and outs," remarked the official, with a smile. "And we have done a little quiet prospecting on our own account, since you first brought us your help. Well, there she still is."

"You're sure of it?" asked King.

"Certain! Since she entered that bath establishment, every door of the Amaranth, of Barthelemy's house, and of the bath-house, has been strictly watched. We hope, we expect, that Von Roon will go there. The last telephone message I had from our people there, a few minutes ago, he had not arrived—in fact, he had not left his chambers in Shaftesbury Avenue."

"Ah! you are having those watched, too?"

"Certainly! There is a regular network round these people by this time—they cannot get out of it. We want to get them together."

King remained silent a moment, considering matters.

"Yes," he said reflectively. "It is quite true that Von Roon is at the Amaranth every night. Eleven is about his time—that's when the club opens. As for Barthelemy, I suppose he comes in from his house. Now—what time is this to be?"

"Any time after Von Roon's arrival. Let me explain—but first, do you wish to be there?"

"I shall be very angry with myself if I am not there!" exclaimed King.

"Very good. Our chief men are already ac-

quainted with you—you can go where you like, you understand. Here, take that”—and he thrust a card into King’s hand—“that will save you any trouble. Now, as you are to be there, be prepared for anything after eleven o’clock—at any moment. The whole place will be raided—club, house, bath-house—simultaneously. There won’t be a loophole for a mouse to get out of. And there’ll be a fine scandal in the newspapers to-morrow, no doubt; but the real great thing won’t be said much about—the arrest of the people who stole that secret paper. Well—I think that’s all.”

King went out into the night air thinking harder than ever. He strolled along Whitehall for a while, pondering matters. If the police got Barthelemy, he himself might miss a certain gratification on which he had set his heart. He desired to have Barthelemy all to himself for that good, desirable hour of revenge on which he had counted for so long. He wanted to open his heart to him; he wanted to speak with a brutal frankness; he wanted the full flavour of revenge. If the strong clutch of the law were once laid on Barthelemy he would be baulked of much that he had planned and striven for. Had this raid been carried out in the ordinary way, King would have achieved all his various objects after a fashion which he had carefully arranged, but these new complications altered matters. He had wanted to be the supreme mover and master in this affair; he now recognized that as things were he would be little more than an actor in it.

“But that won’t do—for me!” he muttered as he idled along. “I’m not going to give up the things

I've worked for. Let the police do what they please with Von Roon and Mrs. Tressingham—Barthelemy's my affair!"

Coming to the foot of Trafalgar Square, King stood for a moment or two watching the lights, the traffic, the people. At another time he would have moralized and philosophized about them and the wonderful scene in which they were set; now he looked at them abstractedly, being busily occupied with plots and plans. He had no thought, no intention, of being false in any way to his police allies; that train was laid, and they could put the lighted match to it whenever they pleased. But he was going to lay a new train of his own for Barthelemy, and he would put the match to that with his own fingers.

He went off at last to a quiet restaurant in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross, and there he dined simply and sparingly. Afterwards he sat for some time smoking a cigar and drinking several cups of coffee—always he was thinking and thinking. And, at last, producing his pocket-book, he tore a sheet from it and wrote in pencil a short note which he enclosed in an old envelope, the torn flap of which he patched up with several postage stamps. Crossing out his own name and address from the envelope, he pencilled another, a single name, above them, heavily underscoring it—"Barthelemy." And this done he put the note in his inner pocket and strolled round to the gay haunt of frivolity and terpsichorean pleasure whereat Miss Lydia Linkinshaw was just then delighting the youth of London.

The man who sat in the little fenced-in office at the stage door, reading the evening newspaper,

looked at Banister King with a sort of supercilious wonder when that gentleman's meagre face and slouched hat were thrust in at him. He did not trouble himself to ask the visitor's business.

"I wish," said King, "to see Miss Lydia Linkinshaw."

"Do you?" observed the janitor. "Well, you can't then."

"And—if it is not wasting too much of your valuable time—why not?" asked King.

"Because it's against orders," responded the man. "Which," he continued, pointing a finger upwards, "you can see for yourself, if you'll take the trouble to turn your head."

King remained motionless. Instead of turning his head he put his hand in his pocket, and drawing out a glittering heap of sovereigns, began to finger one.

"My dear fellow!" he said. "There are times when even the strictest orders must give place to absolute necessity. It is imperative that I see Miss Linkinshaw as soon as possible. Here, I'll pencil something on my card—there you are. Show it to your governor, your manager, whom you like, but get it to Miss Linkinshaw, and this coin is yours."

"Well, of course, if it's a serious case," said the janitor. "Why——"

"Serious! It's a case of life and death," exclaimed King. "Here—take the coin now. I'll wait outside."

He went out into a little court and waited until the doorkeeper popped his head out upon him.

"See you at end of this act, sir," he announced.
 "Can't be done any quicker."

"I am obliged to you," said King. "It will do very well."

He remained in the court staring about him and wondering why the outer works of gorgeous variety theatres are always so dingy, and the inner recesses so palatial, until he was summoned to Miss Linkinshaw's presence. Her he found in a corner of a draughty corridor, wrapped in her furs and shivering.

"Sakes alive!" she exclaimed. "Whatever is it? Something awful, I reckon, or else they'd never have let you in."

"Lydia," said King, going straight to his point
 "what time do you finish?"

"Ten-forty, sharp, to-night," replied Lydia.

"Could you dress and be at the Amaranth at precisely eleven?" he asked.

"I could if I like," she answered.

"Then you must and you will like. Listen! You're to drive up to the Amaranth, so as to be there at the moment the doors open. You're to go straight in, find Barthelemy, and give him this note. The instant you've given it to him, leave him."

"And go—where?" she asked.

"Straight home! Go straight home. The affair's coming off to-night, and you'll be best at home."

Lydia fingered the untidy-looking note, staring at the postage stamps which King had used as wafers.

"My—aren't you extravagant!" she exclaimed.

"The idea of wasting good penny stamps like that

—a whole five of them! Look here now—shall I be safe? Safe in doing this?”

“On my word—yes. So long as you do just what I’ve told you to do.”

Lydia nodded.

“I’ll do it,” she said, turning away. “See you to-morrow, then.”

King went away from the theatre and walked slowly towards his own corner of the town. As he crossed Leicester Square the newsboys came rushing along with new editions of the evening papers. One, louder-voiced than the rest, yelled the nature of his wares in King’s ears.

“Stolen Naval Program—Huge Government Reward!”

King took a paper from the lad and left an unheeded sixpence in his hand. There was a lamp close by; he walked into its full glare and opened the paper. There, true enough, was the announcement of the news which he had just heard proclaimed. The Government would pay to any person or persons giving accurate information as to the stealing of the secret naval program, a translation of which had appeared in a foreign newspaper, the sum of ten thousand pounds.

King threw the newspaper away in the street and went slowly homewards.

CHAPTER XXXI

ALL MEN FOR THEMSELVES

George Ellington, returning home after that interview with the great man to which he had been invited at five o'clock, and which, owing to his chief's absence at Scotland Yard and elsewhere, had been prolonged until it was close upon the young man's dinner-hour, found his father and Letty closeted with Marcia. And Marcia was in a state of high indignation, and she turned on her brother with a force and fury which seemed remarkably at variance with her boasted philosophic indifference to the common failings of this life.

"So you believe me capable of descending to the level anonymity, do you, George Ellington!" she exclaimed as her brother entered the room. "You are mean enough to accuse me to my own father of having written anonymous letters about you! Thank you, George Ellington! I have suffered a good deal in my time, but I have never suffered anything likely to give me such stabbing pain as a charge like that! I wonder you dare to look me in the face!"

But George contrived to look his sister in the face squarely.

"Marcia," he said, "you have never ceased to tell me that you considered it a wicked thing on my part to dine alone with Mrs. Tressingham or to visit her alone."

"My opinion still," retorted Marcia. "And always my opinion."

"And I have not forgotten your treatment of me outside 'Ashcroft'—you know when," continued George. "In addition to that—no one but you was aware of what took place in my study on the previous night. So——"

"You're wrong!" exclaimed Marcia. "I was not the only person who knew that she was in your study."

"Not?" cried George. "Why, who else, then?" Marcia laughed.

"She herself knew," she answered. "If you were anything but a thick-headed simpleton you'd have known very well who wrote those anonymous letters."

George started. "Good God!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean——"

"I mean that she wrote them herself," said Marcia. "Of course she did."

"But—her object?" cried George. "Her object?"

"I know nothing about her object," replied Marcia, tossing her head. "I should imagine it was something thoroughly bad and wicked—like herself. And since you have charged me to my father with having written those letters, I desire in his presence to tell you that I never even heard of them and knew nothing of them, and that I consider you—well, I won't say what!—for daring to make such an insinuation against me. Thank God I have not been trained in such a dirty school of politics as you have, where lies and tricks and subterfuges are called—smart diplomacy."

Marcia started swiftly for the door on that last

biting sentence, and it was in vain that George stretched out a repentant and beseeching hand to her.

"But Marcia!" he cried. "Marcia! Oh, hang it all, come back and let me——"

"You're going to stop to dinner, Marcia, surely?" said Letty.

But Marcia swung the door open.

"I'm not coming back, and I shall not stop to dinner," she said indignantly. "Dinner, indeed! I wonder you can eat any."

And she went out and banged the door, and George turned miserably to his father.

"You know, father," he began.

Old Ellington nodded.

"Let Marcia go at present," he said. "She's incensed, and it's no use arguing with an angry woman. That resignation, now?"

George shook his head.

"The Premier wouldn't accept it," he answered. "He refused—point-blank."

Old Ellington picked up an evening newspaper.

"And this reward?" he asked. "Why that?"

"He thinks it a wise move," replied George. "It's his own notion."

How speedily the offer of the big reward was to produce some result neither father nor son just then anticipated. An hour later, as George and his father sat over their modest allowance of wine, Jarvis, who had given one or two unwonted signs of preoccupation during his service at dinner, approached his master with a discreet cough.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but might I have the privilege of a few minutes' conversation with you, sir,

at your convenience?" he asked politely. "A matter of urgency, sir."

"Eh?" said George, turning on him with surprise. "Urgency?"

Jarvis drew one hand from behind his back and showed a copy of an evening newspaper, folded down at the notice of the Government reward.

"About this matter, sir," he replied blandly.

George jumped to his feet.

"Good heavens, Jarvis!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that you know anything about that?"

"I believe I can supply some information, sir," answered Jarvis. "Under conditions, sir."

George stared at him. Then he turned to his father.

"We'd better go into the study," he said. "Come there in a few minutes, Jarvis."

Five minutes later, Jarvis opened the study door and admitted—himself and Miss Parminter. Each assumed a rigid, respectful attitude.

"At your service, if you please, sir," said Jarvis. "Er—Miss Parminter is also connected with me in the desire to impart information, sir."

George looked at his butler and his wife's maid as if he scarcely knew what to do with them.

"Good Lord!" he said. "Both of you! Do—do you both know something?"

"Both, sir," replied Jarvis. "We can both tell something."

"Under conditions, sir," said Parminter. "Only under strict conditions."

George gave them another look, then he turned to his father. Old Ellington nodded and pointed to two chairs, placed between his and his son's.

"Let them sit down," he said. "Here—take these chairs, both of you."

George stared at his two domestics as a man might stare at a couple of plaster casts which have suddenly intimated their power to speak and to inform. Jarvis looked like a man who is serenely and smugly conscious of good purpose; Parminter looked the very pink of prim propriety. And neither seemed in any haste to speak.

"Well, Jarvis," said George, "what is it?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but before speaking we wish to have our conditions understood," replied Jarvis.

"We can't say anything until that's done, sir."

"Conditions—conditions!" exclaimed George.

"What conditions?"

"Well, sir—you see, we might tell you what we certainly can tell, and then, why, it might be used against us. Then, of course, we want to be certain about that reward. Now, if I might suggest, sir——"

"Suggest by all means," said George, impatiently. "Speak out!"

"Well, sir, if you'd write a formal note saying that you promise not to use the information which we give you against us, and that you assist us in getting the reward, Miss Parminter and me think that would do, sir. Otherwise——"

"Otherwise, we say nothing," said Parminter.

George looked at his father. Old Ellington nodded.

"Write something of the sort they want," he said.

"I think they mean that you are to regard this as strictly private, and that they are not to suffer through any confidence they may give you."

"That's it, sir," said Jarvis, with alacrity. "We're fully trustful in Mr. George Ellington's word, sir—fully."

George sat down at his desk, and after some labour and consultation, evolved a document to the approval of Mr. Jarvis and Miss Parminter, each of whom then desired to be furnished with a separate signed and witnessed copy.

"You see, sir, we must protect ourselves," said Jarvis, when this proceeding was over, and each had grasped the guarantees. "Well—I think Miss Parminter had better speak first, sir."

Old Ellington and young Ellington listened in silence to the story which Miss Parminter unfolded. She told it without embellishment, without varnish, without comment, narrating the plain facts of it in a plain fashion.

"And you took this money?" said George at the end, gazing at her as if she were a strange animal until then only known by repute.

Parminter made a grave bow.

"I took the money, sir—certainly," she answered. "We all have to do our best for ourselves, sir—especially people in my walk of life. Of course, I took it. I am aware, sir, that it might be said that I was doing wrong in admitting Mrs. Tressingham to my master's house in such a way and at such an hour, but it never occurred to me that a lady like Mrs. Tressingham—a nobleman's sister!—would wish to steal anything. And, of course, I knew that Mrs.

Ellington's jewels were safe, and that Mr. Jarvis had all the silver in his pantry."

George laughed, and turned to the butler.

"I suppose the same argument appealed to you, Jarvis?" he said.

"Yes, sir," replied Jarvis. "I knew all the valuables were safe, sir. And, of course, I knew nothing about State affairs, sir."

"Well, what have you to tell?" asked George. "Anything beyond what Parminter has told us?"

"Yes, sir. I knew, of course, sir, when Mrs. Tressingham came into the house. I wasn't in bed. I kept a certain amount of observation. You may be aware, sir, that my room projects a little, and that there's a small window in it. Now that window, sir, looks along the side of the house in which that window of yours—that one, sir—is situated. Well, sir, after I heard Mrs. Tressingham enter the house, I took a glance out of my window to see if there was anybody hanging about. At the corner here, sir, just by your window, there was a tall man. There's not much light at that corner, and I couldn't see his face—I only made out that he was a big, soldier-looking man, sir. Within a minute or two of Mrs. Tressingham's arrival, sir, I heard your window—that window—opened. My own was open—I was looking through the opening, underneath the Venetian blinds. When your window was opened, the man came hastily up to it and something—a sort of package, sir—was passed out to him. He hurried away with it towards Down Street, and he came back with it, and passed it in, the same way, just an hour afterwards."

"You watched all that time?" exclaimed George.

"All that time, sir. After the man had gone away, I saw no more light in here—it had only been a mere gleam. After he came back, there was another gleam. Then you came down, sir—I knew that because I had my door open a mere crack—I was watching. And—that's all, sir."

George looked at his two retainers as if they were difficult to comprehend. "I suppose you know that I ought to pack you both off, this minute?" he said.

Jarvis lifted his paper.

"You've given us your word, sir," he observed.

"Very well. That will do, just now," said George.

At the door, Miss Parminter turned to her master.

"Of course, you'll help us to the reward, sir?" she said.

George waved the two away and turned to his father.

"I think we'd better tell this precious story to the chief at once," he said. "Will you come with me?"

CHAPTER XXXII

FUGITIVE

Von Roon, having seen Hilda Tressingham safely away from his immediate vicinity, hurried back to his chambers, cursing the foolishness of women with all the thoroughness he could command.

"Eh, well, Metz!" he exclaimed, once again within the secure fortress of his own room. "There is no doubt about it—that it is all up! We must get out—now. There will have to be no delay, no packing, no nothing. We must just march."

"And how?" enquired Metz.

Von Roon dropped into a chair and rubbed his fat chin.

"It will be easy enough for you," he said thoughtfully. "I don't suppose anybody knows you—I mean any of those gentry. As for me I must prepare myself. It is well that I understand the useful art of making-up."

"Your rendering of the elderly military man is perfection," observed Metz. "Nothing could be better."

"No, I suppose not," said Von Roon. "Very well—it must be that. But now, yourself. You had better get across to Calais by the night-boat. I will go across to-night also, but I will go to Boulogne.

All things considered, we had better not travel together. I will come on to Calais some time to-morrow afternoon. Meet me at the old place—you know. Wait there for me. Now, as to money—here you are. Now go! Go in what you please, and don't bother about luggage. At times like these, of forced retreats, one carries nothing. Now I shall prepare myself."

And still anathematizing all women, and one in particular, Von Roon went into his dressing-room and began to make preparations for his flight. In the course of a highly-adventurous life he had learnt the value and importance of a proper cultivation of the art of disguise, and he had often gone about London, and into the company of people who knew him, so well made up that he had passed unrecognized. He had no doubt now that he would be able to get away from his chambers and to make his escape from England with as much ease as in those previous adventures. At the same time, he did not minimize his danger. He felt sure that that high political personage whom he had referred to as of a fox-like or lynx-like nature in his talk with Hilda, would certainly see to it that whoever followed that lady to Shaftesbury Avenue would also see to it that observation was kept on the person she visited. And for anything he knew, he, Von Roon, might be better known to the London police than he believed himself to be. Yes, it was decidedly unpleasant, decidedly awkward, more than decidedly disconcerting—and yet, there was nothing else to be done but to get away, for the present. He must leave his comfortable quarters, his soft chairs, his books, his pictures, his beloved piano, his stock of carefully-chosen wines, his

cabinet of choice cigars. He almost shed tears at the thought of such deprivation; he groaned freely as he began to strip off his clothes preparatory to assuming the disguise which Metz had recommended to him. Nevertheless, it was not conceivable to him that he would eventually lose these good belongings, these desirable properties which he had accumulated in his convenient chambers. No—even if he were found out as the purloiner of the now notorious secret document, there was no law in England, surely, which could rob him of his property? He must go, it was true; he must do anything rather than be placed in a prison cell. But he would lock up his chambers; he would ask a certain friend to give out that he had gone abroad for the sake of his health; that friend would look after his goods until—well, until they could be packed up and sent overseas to him. For Otto von Roon knew very well that he would never set foot in London again—or, at any rate, for a long time. That utterly foolish woman, with her ideas of love and marriage, had spoiled everything—everything!

“She was, I suppose, falling in love with me all the time, then?” he muttered to himself, as he set about shaving off his blonde moustaches. “Bah!—these women always spoil all delicate work with that! As if I had time to consider such matters.”

Then he gave himself up to considering nothing but the precise matter in hand, with the result that he eventually achieved what he felt to be a triumph. Never had he done better.

“There is not an actor of them all who can surpass me at this fine branch of their art!” he thought complacently, as he studied the effect of his work in

his full-length mirror. "Who would know this for the Otto von Roon who sat at that desk in his shirt-sleeves an hour ago? No man! And now there is nothing needed but courage—confidence. I embrace them!"

In and out of the ground floor hall of the chambers in which Von Roon was achieving these triumphs, people were perpetually passing. There were many sets of chambers in that building, and some of them were used as offices; two men who kept an observing eye upon the swing doors which admitted to Shaftesbury Avenue had therefore a stiff task in taking notice of those who came and went. Moreover, neither of them was personally acquainted with Von Roon; all that they knew of him was by description; they, in fact, were acting as stop-gaps until a man who was well acquainted with him came on the scene. Naturally, they were anxious and fidgety.

About half-past six o'clock there came out of the entrance of the chambers a tall, elderly gentleman, whose appearance was notable and distinguished. He was dressed in the height of fashion; a glossy silk hat crowned his handsome head, and was set at a rakish angle; a warm overcoat, finished off with a luxurious collar of fur, protected him from the evening wind. Perfectly-creased trousers fell over his gaitered boots of patent leather; his whole air denoted well-to-do-ness; his gold-mounted umbrella was as solid as himself. He walked carelessly away, pausing for a moment to glance into the window of a print-shop close by; standing there, he fumbled for and drew out a gold-mounted monocle. Adjusting it to his eye he peered at the goods exposed for sale. Then he moved

off, leisurely enough, a fine-looking, white-moustached, white-whiskered old fellow, apparently at ease with himself and the world.

One of the two sharp-eyed men who hung about looked at this old gentleman and then at his companion.

"That old fellow who came out hasn't gone in there since we were here," he said. "And that's two hours."

"May live there, or have gone in before we came," said the other.

The first speaker seemed uneasy and suspicious.

"I noticed one or two sword cuts on his cheek—such as Germans have," he said.

"Some old officer," said the other.

"Well, this Von Roon may attempt to escape in disguise," said the first. "Look here, I'll follow that old chap a bit. There'll be Chilvers here in five minutes. You can manage until then."

The second man shrugged his shoulders.

"That's some old Army man," he said. "However, do as you think best."

The suspicious individual hesitated a moment, glancing down the street at the tall figure, now slowly retreating toward Piccadilly Circus.

"I'll watch him a bit, anyway," he said. "If I notice anything, I'll follow him up and let you and Chilvers know somehow."

And he went off sharply until he came within easy distance of the leisurely pacing figure in front, easily discernible from the rest of the crowd by its height, saunteringly afterwards. All unknown to Von Roon, the chase had begun, and the sleuth-

hound that was on his track was watching for any sign which would suggest to his practised eye that his quarry was wanting to escape and feared pursuit.

That sign came quickly. Von Roon soon paused—again to look into a shop window. The pursuer, following his own methods, managed to watch him, and saw that his man had no interest whatever in the goods which he affected to gaze at, and that his real object in pausing was to look stealthily back along the short distance he had come. His suspicion grew stronger; he began to have some confidence that he was on the right track, and when Von Roon moved on again he too moved, always effacing himself and always watching.

Von Roon went on to Piccadilly Circus, threaded the traffic, and at the corner of the Criterion joined a small knot of people who were awaiting the south-running omnibuses. Here the sleuth-hound did a smart thing. He, too, joined the waiting throng, making himself look as casual and as unconcerned as he could, and certainly betraying no interest in the military-looking, elderly person. He was already assured that his man was going to board an omnibus; in that case he was going to board the same conveyance—and he was not going to follow but to precede. If, which was unlikely, he got on the wrong omnibus, it would be an easy matter to get off it. But in his experience, men who were afraid of being followed naturally concluded that they were being dogged from behind; it never occurred to them that their pursuers would get in front of them.

A Victoria omnibus came up; the sleuth-hound knew by instinct that his man was going to board it.

Therefore he himself bustled forward as it drew to the kerb; his quick eye had noticed that the hindermost seat at the top was vacant, and he meant to have it. He climbed the stair and secured it before the vehicle had fairly stopped, and leaning over the side and looking back he saw that the tall, elderly, military-looking man had disappeared from the knot of people. He was, accordingly, safe inside.

The hunter and the hunted, rolling on to Victoria, one, at any rate, unconscious of the other's presence and interest, were each occupied with busy thoughts. Von Roon believed that he had got safely away from the vicinity of his chambers; had his flight been observed, he argued, he would have been stopped before he had reached Piccadilly Circus. He now considered himself safely launched on his short voyage to the port of safety—which meant the coast of France. But he was not quite decided as to his exact line of voyage. He had told Metz that he would go by Folkestone and Boulogne, but it had always been Von Roon's policy through life to tell even his confidantes—who were usually friends of a moment and only friends while they were serving him—that he would do one thing, and then do another. And it was in true accordance with that policy that he had already decided to travel by another route than that of which he had spoken to his man. He would go by the 8.45 boat train from Victoria to Newhaven, and thence cross to Dieppe. If he eventually decided to meet Metz at Calais next day, he could easily travel along the coast from Dieppe. But he was not decided about even that; his main notion was to get out of England. And the course he was taking was the speediest.

As for the man on the roof of the omnibus, he was wondering what his best plan was. He canvassed that subject pretty thoroughly between Piccadilly Circus and Victoria; finally he determined to see what his man did when he arrived at that terminus, and to shape his own course on the results. Meanwhile, he kept a sharp look-out over the side of the omnibus, determined that the inside fare should not alight and go away unwatched.

But Von Roon rode through to Victoria, and never looking right or left, walked into the station. The sleuth-hound, in his clever, patient fashion, followed and watched him. He saw Von Roon go to the first-class ticket office and make an enquiry; he saw him purchase a ticket. After that he watched him enter the restaurant and make a simple meal of hot soup; he followed him from the restaurant to a shop in the neighbouring streets, where Von Roon purchased a warm travelling rug, a cap, and a small handbag. He again followed him to the restaurant and watched him purchase a packet of sandwiches, some fruit, a substantial flask of brandy, all of which he placed in the bag. Finally, he followed him to the train for Newhaven. And still irresolute, still undecided, the sleuth-hound sent a porter for a ticket and got into the train himself.

But the irresolution was gone when the sharp night air of Newhaven was reached. It was now or never so far as the hunting was concerned. And Von Roon, airily stepping towards the boat, suddenly found three men close in upon him, and he knew that the time had come when he must answer awkward questions.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE REVOLVER

Once away from Von Roon, Hilda Tressingham hurried forward as people always hurry under such circumstances as those in which she then found herself. The events of that day had left her confused and doubtful; she wanted to think quietly and clearly, but the dominating notion of putting so much space between herself and the shadowy fear of an unknown danger prevented all unimpeded thought. All she was conscious of just then was that she had somehow, somewhere, made a mistake of judgment, and that Von Roon had been greatly and surprisingly incensed by it. And yet it had seemed to her that she had seized an opportunity. She had a certain passion for Von Roon which had steadily grown; she could give no explanation of its why and wherefore. She was only aware that it existed, and she had come to believe that one great desire of Von Roon's was that she should be free. The sudden appearance of her husband had seemed to her to present an opportunity, and she had taken it.

But it had come upon her with a shock to find that Otto von Roon did not seem to see eye to eye with her on this point. Clearly he had been taken aback, had been non-plussed, had shown unmistakable anger.

Something in her action had upset his plans. And there was more than that, and that more was the principal thing in the immediate current of her thought—he had shown no ready or real pleasure at the prospect of her freedom. This had acted as a cold douche to the warmth of her feelings. Woman-like, she had immediately asked herself the pertinent question—was he tired of her? She had been quick to observe that his first concern was about himself, his own personal safety, that he had shown fear of having her at his rooms lest she should bring danger upon him. What did all this mean? She felt, as she made her way towards the St. James's district, that this was a matter which she and Von Roon must settle definitely and as soon as might be.

In her usual methods and modes of everyday existence Hilda never walked where she could ride. But on this occasion she was so much taken aback by the doings of the afternoon that she walked forward unconsciously, and it was with a start that she suddenly pulled herself together and found that she was in a small street lying between the back of the National Gallery and the Haymarket. She was not conscious of how she got there nor why she had come there. But she found herself looking into the window of a gunsmith's shop. She could no more have explained her next action than she could have explained her presence in that street, but it was prompt and decisive. She turned into the shop, and asked to be supplied with a revolver. If she had paused to think why she did this she might have found an explanation in the fact that she was experiencing a sense of danger, more or less near. But she did not pause. From

the moment in which Von Roon had shown her out of his back entrance she had acted automatically, doing things as if she were a mechanism impelled by some powerful cause, and she had no inclination to trace her impulses. And she looked a little blankly at the polite shopman, who explained to her that before one can buy arms it is necessary to be in possession of a licence to carry them. Then Hilda remembered that she already had a revolver in one of her cabinets at Down Street, and that she also had a licence. She remembered also that they might as well have been at the North Pole for all the use they were to her.

“But I am leaving town for abroad in an hour or two,” she said. “I want to take a revolver with me in case—in case it’s needed, don’t you know?”

The shopman quite knew; he also added that a licence could be purchased at the post-office close by. And Hilda went out and bought the licence, and returned to the gunsmith’s shop and bought the revolver and a small supply of cartridges, and she carried away her parcel of potential mischief, and went off across the Haymarket and through St. James’s Square, and in due time she presented herself at Mr. Barthelemy’s private house.

Barthelemy had a confidential man-servant who was as wise and astute as his master desired him to be. He it was who opened the door to Mrs. Tressingham, and knowing her well enough, permitted her to enter without question.

“Mr. Barthelemy is not come in yet, ma’am,” observed the man. “But I expect him every minute. Perhaps you will wait?”

"Yes," replied Hilda. This was precisely what she had wanted; the man was saving her trouble. "I will wait. I think Mr. Barthelemy will expect to find me here," she added.

Shown into a small room, half library, half smoking-room, Hilda took advantage of being left alone to load her revolver. It had five chambers; she filled them all, made sure that the weapon was in working order, and then slipped it into a handy pocket of her gown, specially contrived for carrying private matters. Even then she had no clear conception of her reason for buying the revolver—all that she cared to be conscious of was that she had got it.

But she had no idea of advertising that fact to everybody, so she took up the box of cartridges, and the brown paper in which it had been wrapped, and hid them behind a row of books. And sitting down she waited for Mr. Barthelemy.

It was very quiet in that house—as quiet as the grave, she thought, unconsciously falling back on a platitude. No grave, indeed, could well have been quieter, for no sound penetrated to where she sat. The evening wore away, but the master of the house did not come, and Hilda's nerves began to suffer. And at last she rang the bell, and the astute serving-man came.

"You don't know how long Mr. Barthelemy will be?" asked Hilda.

"I don't, ma'am. But he's dining here—dinner has been waiting for him for some time," answered the man. "I thought, perhaps, he was expecting you to dine?"

"No," replied Hilda. "But I can't go until I

have seen him, and I'm getting faint. I wish you'd bring me some biscuits and some—say, whisky and soda."

The man knew Mrs. Tressingham for one of his master's most intimate friends or clients, and he hastened to obey her wishes—he even suggested that nothing would please Mr. Barthelemy better than that Mrs. Tressingham should dine forthwith. But Hilda shook her head—solid, substantial food, she knew, would just then prove repulsive to her. She drank thirstily of the whisky and soda, and ate a crumb or two of biscuit—and suddenly in came Barthelemy, a newspaper in his hand.

Hilda knew at once that Barthelemy was concerned and anxious. His usually bland and suave expression was dimly troubled. He shut the door carefully behind him and stood looking at her. Hilda rose; they stared at each other in silence.

"You—you have heard from Von Roon?" she said at last. "Or—you have seen him?"

Barthelemy placed the newspaper on the table and put a forefinger on a line of big black type.

"I have not heard from him," he answered.

"Nor—nor seen him?" she exclaimed.

"Nor seen him. All I have seen is—that!"

Answering his gestured command she bent forward and saw the announcement of the big Government reward. She looked up at Barthelemy and found him looking at herself.

"Well?" she said.

"Well!" repeated Barthelemy. "You mean—ill! But what does it mean? Something has happened. I know nothing. At least, no more than that. Ten

thousand pounds reward! Ah, that is serious—very serious. As I say, something has happened.”

“But—Otto?” she said. “Otto?”

Barthelemy shook his head.

“As soon as I saw this in the paper,” he answered, “I telephoned to him. There was no answer from his flat in Shaftesbury Avenue. No, not even from that man of his, Metz, who is always in when his master is not. In fact, no one is at the flat. I think friend Otto is—gone.”

“Gone? Where?”

Barthelemy shrugged his shoulders.

“Pooh! Wherever it is safe. Of course!”

Hilda sank into her chair again. A nameless fear was coming over her—she began to wonder, to suspect——

“But he told me,” she said, “he told me——”

She paused at that, and Barthelemy fixed his attention on her.

“You have seen him, then?” he said pointedly. Then, seeing that she made no immediate answer, he went on with a firm note that began to rise to sternness. “Come, you had better say. This is serious, very serious, and if you come to my house, it must be with some definite purpose. You had better tell me everything—now.”

“I don’t know what to tell,” replied Hilda. “I—I saw Otto this afternoon.”

“Where?”

“There—Shaftesbury Avenue.”

“Ah! ah! So I thought. Well—well?”

“He thought—he seemed to think there was—dan-

ger. I don't quite know how. And he sent me away to come here—and wait. He said I should be safe."

Barthelemy's eyes began to grow stormy; the woman, watching him, began to think of animals in whom anger begins to be aroused. Also, she saw his fingers—long, white, supple fingers, begin to twitch, as if they itched to lay hold of something.

"Ah!" he said, in a deep, murmuring growl. "So there is danger. And you were to come here. Where you could be—safe. But—he—he—himself? What of him?"

"He said he would join me here," she replied. "I've expected him every minute."

Barthelemy suddenly laughed. The laugh made her shiver. He came nearer to her, shaking a raised finger.

"Now, you will tell me the truth!" he said. "This danger, now? Did Otto von Roon think there was danger there—at his rooms? Answer me quick!"

"Yes. He did—yes."

"Why?"

"He thought I had been tracked there—by detectives."

"Ah! And so he got you out, and sent you—here? Excellent! And you were such a fool as to think he would follow you? Imbecile woman!—as soon as your back was turned Otto von Roon would be off and away, quick. Oh! And you came here! Having been followed by detectives? Oh! Then it is through you that this has come out—come to light. Detectives! Why——"

He suddenly came closer, his Herculean frame towering above her, and his hands stretched out towards her throat, the fingers working.

"I will make you that you shall tell the detectives nothing!" he hissed. "You shall use your tongue no——"

Hilda suddenly darted aside, snatched the revolver from her gown, and levelled it steadily at Barthelemy's heart.

"If you come a step nearer I'll shoot you," she said. "Look at my hand!"

She kept that hand, steady as a rock, presented to him as with the other she felt for and opened the door. Backing down the hall, she made for the street door, opened it, let herself out, was gone.

Barthelemy, wiping his face, stole up to the door and looked out through the grille that was let in an upper panel. In the light of the lamps without, he saw Hilda cross the street, only to be stopped and surrounded by men who seemed to spring from nowhere.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TRAP

Barthelemy drew back from the grille, shaking all over his big body. He was in no condition to receive a sudden nervous shock, and he had undergone a smart fright when Hilda Tressingham covered him with her revolver. He had been quick to see a certain desperation in her eyes, and his fear was lest she should fire on him before she knew what she was doing. He heaved a mighty sigh of relief when the hall door closed on this dangerous visitor, but it changed to a sharp pang of sheer fear when he saw what happened to her. There was no mistaking that event. She was arrested. Arrested, too, outside his house, he muttered to himself. Therefore, his house was being watched. And, in that case, the club on one side and the medicated bath establishment on the other were doubtless under observation.

Cursing and whining to himself, Barthelemy went back to his study, and getting out a spirit-case refreshed his body and mind with brandy. He took a stiff dram, drew a long breath when he had gulped it down, and then shook his arms and shoulders as if he meant to shake off his fears. But he knew very well that the fears would not be shaken off, and that all the brandy in the world would not prevent evil if evil were really at hand. Something was

coming, and something must be done. He must, at any rate, save his own skin if he could do nothing else.

Barthelemy, always foreseeing possibilities, always forecasting eventualities, always taking the chances of accident into account, had never allowed himself to forget that some day, somehow, something might go wrong, and his entire establishment be blown about his ears exactly as a child blows down the house of cards which it has painfully built up. He was accordingly always prepared for a sudden catastrophe. He kept no incriminating papers or documents on his premises; his valuables, his securities, his ready money were kept safely elsewhere; he was ever ready to disappear from that scene at short notice. And now he had nothing to do but to possess himself of one or two small articles from a private bureau in the room in which he stood. His hands were growing steady as he found his keys and unlocked his drawers and placed those articles in the pockets of his frock coat. One article he deposited within a very private pocket made in the lining of his waistcoat; it was a phial of the same sort as that from which he had dropped a certain liquid into Ivory's whisky and soda. It might come in handy, he said to himself, as a last, a desperate resource.

But Barthelemy was not the man to believe that the last had come, that things had reached the most desperate stage, until he was firmly convinced that he saw danger actually face to face. He might be foolishly frightening himself even now, he thought—there might be no reason, no reason whatever for alarm. There might be good reasons for arresting

the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham, but none for interfering with him and his establishments. Who knew anything against him? Who was likely to tell anything against him—unless it was she herself, hell-cat that she was! Nevertheless, he was going to take care; he was going to run no unnecessary risks. It was unfortunate, it was damnably annoying, that Mrs. Tressingham should have come to his house when the police were after her. He cursed her heartily for doing so. Yet—they might want no more than to take her in custody. And again—they might want much more—much. It was the latter possibility which frightened Barthelemy and made him shake like a jelly and sweat with anxiety. He must do something: he must act.

Barthelemy had found it impossible to carry on his affairs without the aid of two or three confidential (and therefore highly-paid) men. There was one in whom he had more confidence than all the rest—the smooth-dealing, suave-tongued fellow whom Banister King had first encountered at the medicated bath establishment. Barthelemy had a hold on this man, and never let him forget that he had it, but it was not for that reason that he trusted him as much as he did—his real confidence in him was based on the man's innate love of intrigue and under-hand dealing, and on the profits to be made therefrom. Barthelemy's concerns yielded vast profits to all the people who were employed in them, but to none more so than to this fellow. To him, accordingly, Barthelemy repaired, finding him in a small room wherein he was engaged in posting up accounts. The man started at sight of his employer's obvious concern.

"Something has happened?" he exclaimed, rising from his desk. "It is——"

Barthelemy dropped into a seat.

"It may be nothing—it may be everything," he answered. "I am a little upset. Your head is cool—listen!"

And he told him of finding Mrs. Tressingham in his house, and of what she had said and done, and of what had happened. The listener's face grew graver.

"She was arrested—you are sure?" he asked when Barthelemy had made an end of his story.

"Certain. There was no mistaking that. Arrested! At the corner of the street."

The man seemed to consider matters.

"I know a great many of these fellows," he remarked at last. "I shall go out and take a look round. Now, suppose I see anything suspicious, anything seriously alarming?"

Barthelemy stroked his beard.

"If it is to be a raid," he said reflectively, "they will probably wait until most of our members have come. Midnight—eh? It wouldn't suit their purposes to come in before we have our usual gathering, you know. The more people they find here, the better for them—eh? You understand!"

"I understand. All the same, I shall go out and prospect for myself. But you?"

"I?"

"You do not wish to be on the premises if any raid takes place? There is—no need."

"No," said Barthelemy. "There is no need. If there is a raid, then I am—off!"

"Just so. As you say—off. Very well. Now I

am going out. See here—I take this box of fusees with me. You go up to that little room over the front door of the club—shut yourself in there—no light—look out of the window on the street. When I have looked round me a little I shall walk on the other side of the street—slowly. If there seems to be no danger, I shall come back—if I see things that are suspicious, alarming, I shall light a cigar with one of these fusees, in full view of the club—eh?”

“I see.”

“And in that case—you will—eh?”

Barthelemy nodded.

“I shall—of course. I shall go away quietly—at once.”

“And I shall not re-enter,” said the other. “We know where to meet—to-morrow.”

He moved to the door. Barthelemy called him back.

“There is nothing you want to—take?” he enquired suggestively.

The man smiled.

“Nothing. I have always been prepared.”

“I, too,” said Barthelemy. “Well, go then!”

The man went out, and Barthelemy presently rose and making his way to the club, lingered for a minute in its hall. It was just eleven o’clock, the door had that moment been thrown open, and early arrivals were coming in. There was nothing unusual about the appearance of the place; the servants were coming and going; pretty women were passing upstairs to the supper rooms; men were approaching the bar which opened out of the hall; everything seemed to be moving on the usual well-oiled wheels.

Barthelemy could have shed tears to think that this well-contrived, well-managed business might at any moment be thrown into confusion, brought to ruin. It was wicked—it was cruel—it was stupid.

He lingered a moment longer, exchanging nods and smiles with the people who passed him; then he went up to the room which his assistant had spoken of, locked himself into it, and turned out the electric light. From the darkness he looked out through the blinds upon the lighted street below.

There was nothing in what he saw to alarm Barthelemy or to excite undue suspicion in his mind. That was a quiet street on which the club fronted; it led to nowhere in particular, and was not on the way between any two principal thorough-fares. It was indeed never so busy as at this hour, when people began coming to the Amaranth Club. And on this night there was just the usual coming and going; automobiles, taxi-cabs, hansom cabs, private carriages came and went, their lamps flitting about in the gloom like fire-flies. There was no special stress of the traffic thus made, nothing to denote any thing exceptional. The night was, in this respect, as all other nights were.

But the man watching eagerly and with straining attention from behind his blinds was not concerned with the vehicles which brought the moths and butterflies, the hawks and pigeons of London night life to the door beneath him. He knew their object, their business, their pleasure. What he was concerned with was the possible presence of enemies. Scarcely a pedestrian passed along that side of the street which he could see; those who came in sight upon it, crossed

it on their way to the club. He began to imagine things. He fancied that eyes, fierce, malignant, were watching him, and the house next door, and the bath establishment next door to that, from the windows of the opposite houses, that in the dark doorways figures lurked hidden, spying, peeping, biding their time. He began to feel as a man feels who walks through a shadowy wood and becomes obsessed with the idea that an enemy is hidden behind every tree or every bush. And he stirred impatiently and wondered how long he was to wait for the agreed-upon signal from the emissary.

The emissary came into view at last, strolling slowly along the opposite side of the street: Barthelemy knew him by his gait and figure. He came abreast of the club, he paused—was he going to make that signal or not? In the gloom of the street he paused, he stopped—he appeared to be fumbling in a pocket. And suddenly a red glow of light spluttered and hissed across the way. So—here was Danger!

Barthelemy lost no time. He watched the fusee throw off its last glowing spark; he saw the emissary stroll onward, puffing at his cigar; then he let himself out of the room, switched on the electric light as he passed the door, and went down stairs. And at the foot of the stairs an attendant stopped him.

“There’s Miss Linkinshaw looking for you, sir,” he said. “She wants to see you particularly.”

“I cannot see anyone—I’m very busy,” answered Barthelemy, passing on. “You must tell her——”

But at that moment Lydia Linkinshaw pulled his sleeve with one hand and pushed a note before him with the other.

"Guess you're not too busy to read that, Mr. Barthelemy," she said. "Get it read—quick!"

She was gone before Barthelemy could speak to her, and as he tore open the note he saw her run out of the hall door and jump into her motor-car. As she whirled off he looked down at the scrap of paper she had left him and recognized Banister King's handwriting. He held it up to the nearest light and read:

"You are in great and immediate peril. Don't waste a moment, but get out of that and come round to my place at once, where you will be safe. Hurry!—KING."

It was characteristic of Barthelemy that he immediately crumpled this note in his hand, stepped over to the open fire and dropped the scrap of paper into the flames. Then he turned and went, by ways only known to himself, into his own house and away.

CHAPTER XXXV

HIS OWN HAND

Banister King sat, quiet and expectant, in his own rooms. When he had first set up his tent there he had exercised both care and ingenuity in making his chambers sound proof, and although at that hour of the late evening there was always a great rush of wheeled traffic in the immediate surroundings of Jermyn Street, he heard nothing of it. The atmosphere of that sitting-room was peaceful as a hermit's cave on the slope of a lonely mountain. That, however, was all of the hermit-suggestion that it possessed; otherwise it was suggestive of luxury. There was a bright and cheery fire in the grate; there was a spirit-case on the table; there were cigars and cigarettes and syphons and glasses to keep it company. Also on the table was the evil-eyed, diabolical image which Richard Avory had found keeping Banister King in countenance on the evening on which he had called on him to suggest his doubts of the Amaranth Club. And before it, sending up wicked-looking spirals of smoke into the faint, opalescent light of the room stood the arabesque incense-burner.

As for King, he sat doing nothing. He had a strange prescience that nothing would go wrong with the plans he had laid. Lydia Linkinshaw would keep her word—whatever her other small failings might

be. She always kept her word when it was once given. She would hand his note to Barthelemy at what King felt sure would be the critical moment. And Barthelemy would be sure to come—would be glad to come; it was a conviction with King that in the fit scheme of things Barthelemy would have to come. And——

Barthelemy was here now. There was a faint, a very faint tap on the outer door, a feeling about, a rustling—King had purposely left open his inner door and his parlour door in order to catch the first sound of his visitor's arrival. It was as if a hunted beast had arrived, and was nervously scratching on a threshold which might be neighbourly and might not; there was a suggestion of fear in Barthelemy's gentle knocking. King went over and opened the door, standing aside and waving a hand towards the interior.

"Come in," he said.

Barthelemy walked in with a sigh. He had hurried himself into a great fur-lined coat before he left his own premises, and had twisted a neckerchief about his throat; he undid the neckerchief and unbuttoned the coat, still sighing, while his host shut the three doors which stood between the sitting-room and the stairs.

"I knew you'd come," remarked King quietly, as he turned to his guest.

"Take that chair—you'll find it the most comfortable," he went on, pointing to one which, of heavy build and construction, was set on the hearth, exactly facing the ugly image on the table. "And have a cigar and a drink. Brandy—eh? You look a bit—white—eh?"

Barthelemy sat heavily in the chair and glanced at the contents of the table. His bushy eyebrows drew together in a frown as his glance fell on the image, and King laughed.

"Yes, brandy—and soda," replied Barthelemy. "A good dose, if you please."

"Yes—that's it," asserted King. "Nothing like it—if your nerves have got a bit upset. There you are, Barthelemy. You're all right here—nobody could get at you here unless I chose. This is a castle—eh?"

He looked critically at Barthelemy as the fugitive drank deeply of the contents of the big glass. Barthelemy grunted.

"I'm obliged to you," he said. "I—but how did you know? You've heard something, then?"

"Heard something," asserted King. "Yes. You know, I've a penchant for knowing all I can get to know about the queer things in London life, and I have a friend or two in the police force who occasionally puts me up to interesting matters. So I heard of this, and I was just in time, it seems, to get you away."

"Ah!" exclaimed Barthelemy, looking up eagerly. "So—it is a raid?"

"To be sure. A good, serious raid. They'll explore every nook and cranny of your three places down there, Barthelemy," replied King easily, as if he were communicating pleasant tidings. "I'm afraid you've finished business there, you know."

Barthelemy snarled and his long white fingers began to work.

"If I only knew who had given the thing away!"

he said bitterly. "If I only knew—only knew!"

"You'd give 'em something handsome, I suppose?" laughed King. "Well, but, you know, all these affairs come to an end. You're bound to be given away, sometime. Usually, it's the very folk you wouldn't suspect. Now, where's that German friend of yours to-night—Von Roon?"

Barthelemy growled. When he spoke his voice seemed to have become thick and his tones difficult to produce.

"Von Roon!" he exclaimed. "Von Roon—why, he is a partner of mine. You don't suspect him?"

"I should always suspect partners," answered King.

Barthelemy groaned and pushed his empty glass across the table, signing to King to refill it.

"More, please," he said. "I'm all broken up. What a loss! What a magnificent business, ruined!"

"Perhaps you'll start another elsewhere," suggested King with a smile. "In some other country, eh? A far-away country, Barthelemy, eh?"

Barthelemy drank again—deeply—and took one of the cigars which his host offered him.

"I don't like leaving England," he said. "And I won't go out of Europe."

"Needs must where the devil drives," remarked King cheerily. "Maybe you'll have to. Excuse me a moment."

He disappeared into an inner room, and Barthelemy drew smoke from his cigar and drank his brandy and soda and let his big head drop forward on his breast and stared at the fire, and shed a tear or two of great compassion for himself. He was a

fugitive, a wanderer, an outcast—a largely well-to-do one, doubtless, but still, driven out. This was certainly a very pleasing preliminary refuge, however, and the fire was alluring, and the easy-chair most comfortable. He was quite conscious of that soothing fact one moment; the next moment he was not conscious of anything, for he had fallen fast asleep.

Barthelemy woke with a start, dreaming that some one had suddenly plunged him head foremost into a tub of icy cold water. He jumped in his chair and found himself unable to move. And then he discovered that he was bound hand and foot in that chair; that nothing of him but his head was free, and that over the polished dome of that head Banister King had just discharged the contents of a large bath-sponge, trickles and dribblets of which were now running freely down his neck and bosom. He stared and gasped and made inarticulate sounds as King tossed the big sponge away.

“No use squirming, squalling, screaming, Barthelemy,” observed King. “The police didn’t get you—they weren’t clever enough—but I’ve got you—I’m a good deal smarter than the police. And there you are, and here am I—and now we’ll come to business.”

Barthelemy’s brain had cleared under the application of the water. He took sharp stock of his surroundings. That he was firmly secured to the heavy chair he knew at once; that he was completely in his host’s power he instantly surmised. But he was not just then so much concerned with these two facts as with some others. There, immediately in front of him, propped up at the foot of that

ugly, diabolical image, King had placed a large photograph of Richard Ivory. And, on a sheet of paper in front of it, lay the phial which Barthelemy had brought away with him from his own house. King had taken it out of his pocket and laid it there immediately before his eyes, immediately beneath the picture of his victim. Why? The sweat started out on Barthelemy's forehead, and in spite of himself he groaned. And on that King laughed, as with genuine pleasure.

"Nothing that I could hear in the form of music," he said, "could give me such genuine delight as that, my good Barthelemy. Let me hear you groan, moan, sob, sigh, weep, implore—it will rejoice me!"

Barthelemy checked himself in the beginning of another groan. He became, quite suddenly, very cool; he regained possession of his faculties at their calmest. He could not move a hand or a foot, scarcely a toe or a finger, but he could move his head, and he held it up sternly and looked fixedly at his captor.

"You are a vile scoundrel!" he ejaculated. "A villain!"

King laughed again. He had been mixing a drink for himself, and now, having got it to his satisfaction, he lighted a cigarette, sipped at his glass, and perching his lanky figure on the edge of the table, swung his long legs contentedly and looked with amused enjoyment at his prisoner.

"On the contrary," he said. "I am a good gentleman. I am a faithful friend, even to the dead: I am an implacable enemy—to the living. You don't understand that, Barthelemy? Let me explain. This

man, Richard Avory, is dead. You murdered him. Therefore I hate you, and——”

“You mean to murder me,” said Barthelemy calmly. “To murder me in cold blood. You are worse than a scoundrel. You are a liar! You inveigled me into your rooms on the pretence of giving me shelter and hospitality. You begin by drugging me—you mean to end by killing me. You have an English word—short, very short!—which expresses you, Mr. Banister King. Cad!”

King’s expression changed from one of banter to a look of anger. “I am not going to bandy words with you, Barthelemy,” he said. “You murdered Richard Avory in the coldest of bloods and moods, and you know it. I know all about it: I have spent months in finding it out. You gave him his dose in your house, knowing when it would take effect and that he would die in his sleep—there in his own room, in his own bed. You relied on your scientific knowledge—forgetting that others might find out what you knew. I found out—with the help of specialists. There, before you, is the phial of the drug you used—I fancied you would bring it away with you, so that you could use it on yourself in an emergency—well, do you understand?”

Barthelemy stared at his tormentor and remained silent. And King went on.

“Your wheel has come full circle, you see, Barthelemy,” he continued. “I’ve steered it round to the point I wanted. It was I who gave information to the police about you—oh, it’s no good swearing, no good cursing!—I who engineered everything. But

I wasn't going to let the police have you. I wanted you for myself—to play with. Now, you're going to drop out as you made poor Ivory drop out—by means of your own accursed drug. Do you understand that, my friend?"

Barthelemy glared his defiance.

"You can't make me take it!" he exclaimed. "Curse you—you can't make me lift a finger to take it!"

King got up from the table and picked up the phial. It was an affair of dark glass and exhibited nothing of the contents. King drew the cork and turned the phial upside down. Not a drop fell from it.

"It's empty, you see, Barthelemy," said King quietly. "It was so easy to pour it out for you when you dropped off to sleep so nicely. Now you can drop off again, and you can—die."

He turned away as he spoke and flung the coloured phial into the fire, but turned back sharply on hearing a sound from his prisoner. And he saw then that Barthelemy had fainted under the horror which had forced itself upon him. His head had fallen back in the easy-chair; his jaw had dropped; his eyes turned inward; he looked already like a dead man.

King sat down for a while and watched his captive. He saw him come out of his fainting fit only to relapse instantly into unconsciousness. At that he picked up a cap and went out of his rooms. In five minutes he was back, and half a dozen plain-clothes men were with him. And Barthelemy was still unconscious and still captive.

“There he is!” said King. “He slipped you, but he didn’t slip me. I’ve done with him. He’s died one death already—in imagination; now you can take and hold him for another—the real one. What you want him for is a trifle. It’s nothing to what I shall prove him guilty of.”

“No?” exclaimed one of the men. “What’s that, then?”

“Murder,” replied King. “Murder!”

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE CURTAIN

All London was agog with excitement that morning. The newspaper men had never been to sleep; the newspaper offices had been kept continually busy; the machines were for ever running; the linotype men were for ever setting up the fresh copy which breathless reporters and special correspondents poured into the office. New editions, specials, extra specials, sudden stop-press editions were being perpetually flung out into Fleet Street, thrown into carts, seized upon by bicycle carriers, circulated like waste-paper all over the town. By breakfast time the world and his wife knew of the existence of a great Plot. It already knew that somebody had managed to steal a most confidential secret document, wherein were set forth certain drastic and far-reaching proposals as to British naval development; it already knew that the contents of this document had been revealed to a German newspaper, and that the German newspaper had published a translation of them on the previous day. But it had not known who the thieves were. Now it knew—knew, at any rate, as much as Fleet Street could tell it. And it gaped over the coffee and rolls, the eggs and bacon, and wondered that such things could be. And some of it neglected the

sacred rite of breakfast, or performed it perfunctorily, and hurried to Bow Street, madly anxious to catch even a glimpse of the culprits whose nefarious doings had brought Europe to the very threshold of war.

They had got two of those culprits, at any rate, according to the newspapers. And one was a fashionable lady, the sister of a peer, the wife of a gallant soldier, and herself a very beautiful woman—the Honourable Mrs. Tressingham. Not very much known, perhaps, in Society, but sufficiently known to be deeply interesting; interesting enough to make it well worth one's while to see her standing in the dock. And the other was a well-known man about town, a German—Otto von Roon—familiar to certain circles in the City and to other circles in the West-End. Some of the illustrated dailies had contrived during the early hours of the morning to obtain photographs of these two; certainly they were notable-looking people. And there was romance and mystery about the manner of their arrest. The man had been arrested in the very act of stepping on board the Dieppe boat at Newhaven; the woman, outside a certain night club in the St. James's district, which, only an hour or two later, was raided by the police and turned out to be the mere ante-chamber to a gambling den of the best—and therefore worst—sort. Decidedly, this was an interesting and exciting morning!

But there was more. There were hints, veiled, mysterious hints, that the proprietor of this Amaranth Club, now also under arrest, was mixed up in this affair, and that he was a Prince of Criminals. He, too, would appear in the dock—perhaps not with the

other two, for there were vague hints of dark charges against him of a graver nature than the theft of Government papers. He would perhaps make an appearance a little later, preliminary to terrible revelations. But at ten o'clock Hilda Tressingham and Otto von Roon would certainly be on show, and the world and his wife must see them. It had been dull lately in London—here was certainly something to stir the most lethargic.

However crowded a court of law may be, there are people who can always get into it—by influence, by favour, by methods known only to themselves and those who admit them. Bow Street that morning held the proper number of these people. Some of them—like the great man himself, who having been mixed up somewhat considerably in the initial scenes of this drama must needs be witness of its continuing ones—were to be observed on the Bench, in company with Cabinet ministers, ladies of high society, prominent actors, and experts in criminology. Some of them, somehow, found seats at the solicitors' table; some of them, by some secret understanding between them and the court officials, occupied what the more irreverent of them called front pews. And amongst this favoured few were Mr. Banister King and Miss Lydia Linkinshaw, who sat together and exchanged remarks.

"This," observed Miss Linkinshaw, looking about her, "this is as good as any first night. If only one knew them, I reckon there are some right smart folks here, Bannie King. Only I don't."

"I know some of them, anyway," answered King. "There's the Prime Minister, on the Bench, whisper-

ing to Darcy Tollemache, the actor—you know him, of course. That's Sir Biddlecombe Plenkin, the famous criminal lawyer, just beyond him, talking to Lady Dottendashe—they say that old frump hasn't missed a Bow Street *cause célèbre* these thirty years, and I should say she must have been fifty then. And there's George Ellington, the chap that the document was stolen from, you know—that's his wife on one side of him and that's his father, on the other. That man, across there, sucking the end of his walking cane, is Lord Hartsdale, Mrs. Tressingham's brother. And the mahogany-coloured old chap, next to him, who looks so down in the mouth, is Colonel Tressingham, her husband—I saw him at two o'clock this morning trying to persuade 'em to let him bail her out."

"And they wouldn't?" asked Miss Linkinshaw with great interest.

"Not for all the lakhs of rupees in the world—if he had them," answered King with conviction. "There'll be no bail for these people, my dear—the law has its talons fixed firmly in their sensitive skins, and it'll be good-bye to freedom for many a long day for them."

"In the old days it would have been what they call high treason, wouldn't it?" asked Miss Linkinshaw.

"Something closely approaching it, anyway," replied King. "They'd have lost more than liberty, at any rate."

Miss Linkinshaw sighed.

"There's not much picturesqueness left in these days, is there?" she observed, with that *naïveté* for which she was famous. "Now, if they could have

condemned them to death straight off, and then chopped off their heads right here in this court, before all of us, that would have been something like, and made a good curtain. But——”

At this point Miss Linkinshaw's bloodthirsty notions were interrupted by the arrival of the magistrate, at sight of whom the officials noisily demanded silence, and proceeded to become very busy with nothing. And there was suddenly a commotion in the neighbourhood of the dock, and all necks were craned forward, and, ushered to public notice by cold and stern-faced functionaries, Hilda Tressingham came into view.

In the tense moment which followed all eyes, except two pairs, fastened themselves on the woman whose name at that hour was being canvassed and commented upon over half the world. She might have been something which these people were soul-greedy to see, to stare at, to get their fill of. She had contrived, somehow, to make an elaborate toilette; she presented herself to the crowded court dressed in luxurious furs; she scorned the use of any concealing veil. She faced the Bench and the rows of eager faces readily and defiantly, looking them all over as if they had been mere sheep or cattle. But old Colonel Tressingham and Lord Hartsdale, having given the prisoner one sharp look, turned their eyes away from her and looked elsewhere.

“Now for the German,” whispered Banister King. “Will Von Roon hold his head so high?”

But no Von Roon appeared. Instead, came the tall, fleshy figure, the benevolent face and patriarchal beard of Barthelemy. There was no pride about him; there were heavy black circles about his eyes,

a waxen pallor covered his cheeks and forehead; he looked to be in pain and distress, and instead of boldly advancing to the front of the dock he gave his fellow-prisoner a furtive glance and shrank away towards a corner.

And no Von Roon followed. It seemed that at that moment no other prisoner was to follow, for the legal luminary who represented the Treasury was already on his feet and addressing the court. And Banister King turned to his companion with a look of amazed surprise.

“Why—why—where’s Von Roon?” he exclaimed under his breath. “And what’s Barthelemy doing there—with her? I didn’t know that Barthelemy had anything to do with stealing the document. Why——”

“I guess these police folk know more than you do,” said Miss Linkinshaw. “Shut up, Bannie, and let’s hear what the sharp-nosed Johnny has to spit out!”

The sharp-nosed Johnny spat out what he had to say in precise and formal tones and words of more elegance if of less pronounced colour than Miss Linkinshaw’s. The audience learned from him little more than it already knew from reading the newspapers. There had been stolen a certain most important document, relating to immediate naval matters. That document had been divulged to a foreign newspaper, and the persons now in the dock were charged with abstracting it and dealing with it, and there could be no doubt that they were guilty of the charge. But there was much more than that behind—although discovery had come sharply, more

discoveries had come during the night, and the authorities were already in a position to prove that these recent happenings were only part of a gigantic plot, the movers in which, backed up by an apparently inexhaustible supply of money, were concerned in obtaining by wide-spread bribery, British secrets which they were disposing of to other nations, with a view to the weakening of British power. There was, in fact, evidence already in hand which would go to show that the man and woman now before the court were only two members or agents or emissaries of a rich and important syndicate formed with the objects just outlined and hinted at. Fortunately, it had become possible, by direct evidence, to gain an idea of how that syndicate had been worked, and after certain formal evidence had been given in this case, he would bring some of the direct evidence forward.

Nobody paid any attention to the formal evidence given of the theft of the document, nor to that dealing with the arrest of the prisoners, for everybody was very well aware that something sensational was coming. And it came when the Treasury representative in a dead silence called for the witness at whose existence he had hinted.

“Otto von Roon!”

Lydia Linkinshaw, all attention, felt Banister King start violently. He pointed a forefinger.

“Look at her!” he said under his breath. “Look at her!”

Hilda Tressingham had started to the very edge of the dock. Her face, turned towards the entrance through which Von Roon was to come, had grown

very pale, her lips trembled, her eyes burnt with a sombre light. She muttered something to herself, she cast a quick glance at Barthelemy. But Barthelemy stood with his grey beard sunk on his breast; he did not even look up.

Von Roon came jauntily into court, ushered to the witness-box by imperturbable officials. He, too, had managed to make a smart toilette; he looked well-groomed, and well-breakfasted, and quite content with himself, and he had the audacity to smile all over his fat countenance as he stepped up, the cynosure of all eyes. A sudden murmur ran around the benches whereon King and Lydia sat.

“King’s evidence! King’s evidence!”

It was because every man and woman in court was watching Von Roon’s big figure, even to the officials, that nobody watched Hilda Tressingham except Banister King. But King suddenly turned to look at her, and in that instant he sprang to his feet with a sharp cry.

“Look out—look out, there! The revolver!”

He was too late, even then. Before the men in the dock could leap to her side, Hilda had drawn the revolver from her breast and fired. And Von Roon’s confident, defiant smile suddenly died out of his face and gave way to a swift look of anger and dismay as he staggered and fell, dead enough, with a bullet through his heart, across the ledge before him.

* * * * *

“That,” said Miss Linkinshaw, ten minutes afterwards, as she and King struggled out of a crowd

at the corner of Long Acre, "that was as good a curtain as ever I saw, Bannie! Don't you think so, now?"

King signalled to the nearest vehicle.

"Yes," he said. "But—it's only a preliminary to another."

